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Editor's Notebook

PERIODICALS

Film Criticism ($6.00 per year from Allegheny College, Meadville, PA 16335) has published a special issue on Japanese cinema (Vol. VIII, No. 1) edited by Arthur Nolletti, Jr. A wide range of Japanese film-makers are covered (including Mitsuo Yanagimachi) by writers including Donald Richie, Scott Malcomson, Keiko McDonald, Dana Polan, Allan Casebier, Audie Bock, David Desser, James Leach, Stephen H. Barr, and Vlada Petric.

It is good to see that *Film Criticism* has been able to survive, along with *Jump Cut, Cineaste, Camera Obscura,* and a few other serious journals published independently (some with occasional foundation support). A secure organizational base seems to be a great help, and *Wide Angle* has found a new one at Johns Hopkins University Press. Perhaps, after the losses of a few years ago, the journal scene will be stabilized for a while. Readers curious about the inner workings of magazine publication will be fascinated by *Film Comment*'s survey of its own history in the February 1984 issue. One of its most intriguing revelations, for those of us who operate on stringent academic budgets: *FC* is, despite all the cigarette and beer ads and a slow drift toward lighter-weight journalistic contents, a substantial money-loser. It receives support from the Film Society of Lincoln Center, the New York State Council on the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts, and its budget deficit for one year would cover *Film Quarterly*'s for twenty. *American Film,* whose contents are certainly no more weighty, is said to lose far more . . .

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JAMES ROY MacBEAN

Watching the Third World Watchers:

The Visual, the Verbal, the Personal and the Political in *Under Fire* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*

Although the Soviet Union is the source of many of the conflicts in the Third World and profits from most of them, it is not the only cause. . . . The people of these countries have terrible problems. The communists at least talk about the problems. Too often we talk only about the communists.

—RICHARD M. NIXON
(from the former president's new book, *Real Peace: A Strategy for the West*)

In *Under Fire,* a new film directed by Roger Spottiswoode about the final months of Sandinista insurrection in 1979 against the American-supported dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua, a hot-shot news photographer (played by Nick Nolte) finds that his personal files of unpublished photos of Sandinista rebels relaxing in their mountain hideaway have been purloined by a European intelligence agent working with the CIA. The photos have been put at the disposal of a CIA-financed American mercenary, who uses them to identify and summarily execute anyone in his "picture collection." For the photographer, the discovery of how his pictures are used comes as the final blow to his stubborn illusions of the photo-journalist's "neutrality." ("I don't take sides; I take pictures," has been his credo.)

In *The Year of Living Dangerously,* Australian director Peter Weir's 1982 film about foreign correspondents covering Sukarno's Indonesia during the social unrest of 1965, a strangely androgynous, half-caste dwarf, Billy Kwan (played as a man by actress Linda Hunt) uses his skills as a photo-journalist to amass files of surreptitiously taken photographs of his friends. He muses endlessly over these pictures—and over those he has shot of Indonesia's President Sukarno, whom he greatly admires—using the photographs almost as magic talismans or fetishes, whose purpose, it would seem, is to enable him to exercise an imagined, benevolent control over the destinies of those he loves and admires. He is devastated, however, when the people who mean most to him fail to live up to his own "image" of them.

A fascination with photographs—and with their potential use as real or imagined elements of control—is only one of the features shared by *Under Fire* and *The Year of Living Dangerously.* But it is an important one, especially in these two films dealing with highly volatile political situations in the Third World. As a point of departure, we would be wise to recall that, historically, photographs, when first printed in newspapers, were immediately recognized—and used—by the police and the state as "evidence" to suppress political dissent. In 1871, when newspapers in Paris printed photographs of the crowds gathering to hear the leaders of the French Commune holding forth in the streets, the Paris police, on orders from the government, used the published photos to identify and round up both the leaders and many of their listeners.

Aside from their fascination with photographs, both *Under Fire* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* concern themselves with the social and political aspirations and struggles of Third World peoples—not exactly a theme one would expect to be treated at all, much less so sympathetically, by films coming from Hollywood. (*Under Fire* is an Orion Pictures release; and *The Year of Living Dangerously* is an MGM/United Artists release.) Of the two films, *Under Fire* is especially timely,

Film Quarterly

GODARD ON *PRENOM: CARMEN*

THIRD WORLD WATCHING

NEVER CRY WOLF *DANIEL*

ANTONIONI OSHIMA

TESTAMENT BRAKHAGE

SPRING 1984

$2.75

and especially controversial, since it deals with events which happened only four years ago, and whose ramifications for American foreign policy toward the revolutionary Sandinista government in Nicaragua are being hotly debated in the US Congress and in the press.

The *New York Times* has called *Under Fire* "the most controversial" of this fall's bumper crop of politically oriented films (*Silkwood, Deal of the Century, The Final Option* and Costa-Gavras's *Hanna K* are some of the others cited), noting that "*Under Fire* explicitly takes the side of the victorious Sandinistas, and may be the only American movie in recent decades to side with a foreign government against which the US has waged a political and economic battle." The precise nature of that "battle," however, has never been spelled out by the Reagan administration; and *Under Fire,* which contains a sharp portrait of the unsavory role played by the CIA in Nicaragua, may help the American public to focus more attention on the administration's request for massive increases in funding for CIA "covert operations" in Nicaragua. (The producers of *Under Fire* arranged a special preview screening of the film for legislators, held at the National Press Club in Washington early in September 1983.) Finally, *Under Fire* has become all the more timely in light of the recent American invasion of the tiny, Marxist-ruled Caribbean island of Grenada, an invasion which many observers believe was intended as a warning signal to Nicaragua. In fact, with Reagan administration officials publicly acknowledging, in the wake of Grenada, that a future invasion of Nicaragua cannot be ruled out, a film such as *Under Fire,* which is unambiguously sympathetic to the popular Sandinista movement now in power in Nicaragua, is bound to be controversial to American audiences.

But *Under Fire* is controversial for another reason as well. The film dramatizes, in fictional form, a dilemma faced by two American journalists who are asked to put their growing sympathy for the Sandinista cause at the direct service of the revolutionary movement in their work as journalists. This highly charged fictional plot, set within the historical background of a real revolution still very much in the news, raises all sorts of controversial issues. A number of veteran foreign correspondents who were assigned to Nicaragua during the events depicted in the film have pointed out discrepancies, both small and large, in the film's treatment of history. And some journalists have indicated their uneasiness with *Under Fire's* handling of the issues of journalistic ethics depicted in the film.

Interestingly, although it is not nearly as controversial a film as *Under Fire,* Peter Weir's *The Year of Living Dangerously* has also elicited a response from at least one veteran foreign correspondent who was on the scene in Indonesia for many years in the mid-sixties. In a *New York Times* article (Jan. 23, 1983), Bernard Kalb points out that *The Year of Living Dangerously,* while accurately reflecting the general political mood of that period in Indonesia, leaves out a few highly significant political details and offers highly fictionalized versions of other historical events. Perhaps some such distortion is inevitable in any fictionalized recreation of actual historical events and situations. Nonetheless, it is an interesting phenomenon to find veteran foreign correspondents publicly holding dramatic fiction films to account for their depiction both of events themselves and of the way journalists operate in covering those events. Whatever their respective flaws may be, *Under Fire* and *The Year of Living Dangerously* deserve our serious attention for their probing exploration of just what is entailed—and how much is at stake—in western journalism's coverage of Third World social upheavals.

Under Fire: A Thorny Tangle of Fact and Fiction

Although *Under Fire* clearly presents itself as a fiction film depicting the trials, tribulations and love triangles of foreign correspondents assigned to cover various pockets of Third World social unrest (the film opens in Chad), its focus on Nicaragua incorporates so many details with a basis in historical fact that one is invariably bound to appraise the film's handling of the relations between fiction and fact. To its credit, *Under Fire* makes an effort to depict the toppling of Nicaraguan dictator Anastasio Somoza with a great deal of historical accuracy. Where the figure of Somoza himself is concerned, few would

UNDER FIRE: *Nick Nolte*

argue with his portrayal—by actor Rene Enriquez (a distant relative of Somoza)—as a man of unctuous charm, an inveterate womanizer, and utterly ruthless in his self-aggrandizing appetite for power.

Early in the film, Claire (Joanna Cassidy), an American radio journalist, is granted an exclusive interview with Somoza, who obviously is more interested in her good looks than in her questions. When she confronts him with questions about the extent of his land holdings in Nicaragua (he personally owned one-fifth of the country) and the widespread use of torture in his military prisons, Somoza is quickly whisked away by his aides. But in the combination of her catalogue of charges and his slippery evasiveness we manage to get the picture.

Meanwhile, another American journalist, Russell Price (played by Nick Nolte), sets about getting the picture in another way. A man of few words (in English, much less in Spanish, which he, like every other *gringo* journalist in this film, hardly speaks at all), Price is a photographer. He is one of the intrepid breed of macho photo-journalists who will go wherever the action is and risk any danger to get the picture. Combat photos are his specialty; and he seems to follow his nose from one exotic war to another to get the shots that capture the public's attention on the covers of *Time*.

Price disdains words. He sees the world as organizing itself into sudden, revelatory still images, which, if captured in a photograph, somehow seem to epitomize a situation; and the opening sequence of *Under Fire* skillfully utilizes freeze-frame cinematography to let us see the world this way too, as if through Price's camera lens. When *Under Fire* opens, Price is in Chad, covering a civil war. He recklessly exposes himself to aerial strafing in order to photograph an attack by Chad government forces on a rebel supply convoy hauling its supplies by elephant. Click . . . click . . . click . . . goes Price's camera. The film's freeze-frame shots, corresponding to Price's still shots, are certainly picturesque: helicopter gunships blazing away at a panic-stricken elephant convoy. But what these images are supposed to reveal, beyond director Roger Spottiswoode's fantasy vision of Third World civil war, is anybody's guess. More meaningful, perhaps, is the fact that Price encounters a hard-nosed CIA mercenary who is either dumb enough to be riding with the rebels on the mistaken assumption that they are Chadian government troops, or smart enough to have ingratiated himself with the rebels in order to signal their whereabouts

to the attacking government planes and helicopters.

That evening, at a press corps party, Price trains his camera lens on the attractive Claire, who is on the verge of ending a romantic involvement with Alex (Gene Hackman), a senior *Time* correspondent and an old friend of Russell Price's. The next assignment for all three journalists—and, as it turns out, for the CIA mercenary as well—is Nicaragua. "I've heard it's a neat little war with a nice hotel," is Alex's cynical line about Nicaragua. "Cheap shrimp, and not too heavy in the spook department," is the CIA man's appraisal.

Once in Nicaragua, Russell Price moves quickly, both to familiarize himself with the political situation there and to move in on Claire, who, although still fond of Alex, makes it clear to her former lover that their relationship is over, a fact he refuses to accept, however—thus setting up the romantic triangle intrigue that will occupy the film throughout. On the news front, Price happens to arrive in Managua during a popular religious procession, so he takes a quick light reading, leaps onto the fire engine leading the procession, and starts shooting the "local color." In the midst of it all, young schoolboys, hardly in their teens, unfurl a hand-drawn picture of a popular Sandinista guerrilla fighter, "Rafael," whose name quickly becomes a chant of the assembled masses. At this, Somoza's National Guard swings into action, chasing off the placard-bearing schoolboys and opening fire with their automatic rifles into the face of the offending picture, which the schoolboys have dropped in running for cover. Meanwhile, Price photographs it all.

As plot-devices go, this opening scene in Nicaragua is a fairly effective one. The mass popularity of the Sandinista movement is established, as is its association with progressive elements in the Catholic Church in Nicaragua's poorer sectors of the population. Moreover, the mindless brutality of Somoza's National Guard is powerfully and succinctly suggested in the zeal with which they repress any hint of popular rebellion.

The problem is, no such figure as Commandante Rafael existed in the Sandinista struggle in Nicaragua. The guerrilla fighters of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) had, and have, some compelling and revered commanders, including the slain Spanish priest Gaspar García or the pipe-smoking ideologue Carlos Fonseca (who was killed in 1976, some three years prior to the events depicted in *Under Fire*). But there was no single charismatic leader such as Fidel Castro in Nicaragua; and there certainly was no Commandante Rafael. During the struggle to overthrow Somoza, and now, after his overthrow, the FSLN has been led by a directorate of nine leaders (women as well as men), *not* by an awe-inspiring, charismatic figure around whom there has developed a "cult of personality."

Politically, this fact is of the utmost importance. In so misrepresenting history *Under Fire*'s director, Roger Spottiswoode, and its scriptwriter, Ron Shelton, have unnecessarily weakened an otherwise intelligent and sensitive handling of the often confused moral positions of *gringo* journalists trying to cover the situation in a country like Nicaragua. Moreover, by inventing a nonexistent guerrilla leader and building the plot around the photojournalist's efforts to find and photograph this elusive figure, the makers of *Under Fire* doubly fan the flames of the "cult of personality."

It's not only the guerrilla fighter who is glorified, it's also the macho journalist. The fictional plot of *Under Fire* puts Price in a position where, with one click of his shutter, he can change the entire course of the war. In fact, the plot of *Under Fire* puts him in this unlikely situation *twice*.

The first—and most dubious—occasion is when Price and Claire are escorted up into the mountains by the Sandinistas, who promise Price that he will be able to take the "first ever" photograph of Commandante Rafael. The catch is that when he finally comes face to face with Rafael, the guerrilla leader is dead. But the Sandinistas propose that Price photograph Rafael in such a way as to make him appear alive. They explain that they can't afford to let Somoza reap the publicity benefits of having been successful in killing Rafael, for such a success, played up in the media's eyes, would doubtless persuade then-president Jimmy Carter to send Somoza the additional $25 million in arms he had requested.

After some initial hesitation—"I can't do

that, I'm a journalist''—Price agrees, apparently persuaded that his action in falsifying the truth will save countless lives, and apparently persuaded as well of the justness of the Sandinista cause. He takes a photograph (which is quickly distributed throughout the country) of Rafael, who, propped up by two lieutenants on either side, appears to be alive and well and in command of guerrilla operations.

Aside from having no basis in historical fact, this wholly fictional plot development lays *Under Fire* open to attack from all sides. The political right can argue, at least on the terms of this film, that those who supported the Sandinista revolution were willing to lie to achieve political ends; and, more specifically, that the liberal press was willing to lie in order to advance the cause of a leftist, Marxist-oriented guerrilla movement. On the other hand, the political left can argue that *Under Fire* totally distorts the Sandinista movement and the reasons for its success, thereby inviting the very criticisms outlined above, which may be valid objections in regard to the film but are definitely not valid in regard to the real historical Sandinista revolution. Professional journalists, especially veteran foreign correspondents, can argue—in fact, have argued—that *Under Fire* does a disservice to their profession by dramatizing a particularly extreme version of the ethical dilemmas they must face—and then offering a simplistic (and perhaps to some, an ethically and politically repugnant) solution to that dilemma. Finally, women can argue—and I am surprised no one has done so yet, at least not in any of the articles I have read on *Under Fire* —that in its handling of the trick photograph episode *Under Fire* totally ignores the ethical dilemma of the *female* journalist in the film. After all, Joanna Cassidy's Claire is a journalist, and she is with Nick Nolte's Russell when they finally come face-to-face with the mysterious "Rafael." Claire is thus the first "word" journalist, just as Russell is the first photo-journalist, to get on-the-spot confirmation that "Rafael" is in fact dead, and that the Sandinistas want Price to photograph him to make him appear alive and well. Such a story—or even merely the confirmation of his death—would be quite a journalistic scoop for Claire. Yet there is not one moment when

UNDER FIRE: *Joanna Cassidy, Jean-Louis Trintignant*

Under Fire lets Claire give voice to *her* conflicting emotions and loyalties, to *her* personal and professional and political considerations. *Under Fire*'s focus, in typically sexist fashion, is entirely on the male journalist's dilemma. (And, of course, even he does not *verbalize* his dilemma: he merely looks around at the scene in the Sandinista mountain hideaway, sees the children toddling about the compound, sees the women slapping the tortillas, sees the gray-bearded patriarchs of the guerrilla movement stretching their war-weary bones in the sun; and, presumably, that is all Russell Price needs to know of politics. A visitor to Hitler's mountain hideaway in Berchtesgaden might have been similarly persuaded by the idyllic scene of Eva Braun and *Der Führer* frolicking with the local children in *dirndls* and *lederhosen*.)

The mixing of fact and fiction in *Under Fire,* not only in the dilemma of whether to photograph the dead Rafael, but also throughout the film, is both problematic and at the same time fruitful in highlighting some of the media-related issues explored by the film. It is unfortunate, however, that what is gained in raising questions of media ethics seems to be at the expense of historical fact. Even where historical fact is respected in *Under Fire,* its integration within the fictional narrative poses some major problems.

For example, let us turn to examine the second occasion in *Under Fire* when the fictional plot puts Price in a position to alter the entire course of the war. Near the end of the film it is his shots of the brutal killing of

his press colleague, Alex, by one of Somoza's National Guard that supposedly causes the American government finally to withdraw all support from Somoza, thus causing the dictator to realize that it's time to flee Nicaragua while he can still take his millions with him to Miami, along with the coffins of his father and brother. It is true that Somoza, who revered his father and brother, disinterred their coffins and lifted them by helicopter to the plane waiting on the runway to take him to Miami. It is true that a month earlier, on June 20, 1979, an American journalist, Bill Stewart, was shot and killed at close range by a National Guardsman. It is true that this unprovoked killing of an American journalist was recorded on film by another journalist,

and that the airing of this incriminating evidence proved pivotal in the decision of then-president Carter to back away from all-out support of Somoza, thus paving the way for his imminent downfall.

The problem is, the interweaving of a wholly fictional plot and fictional characters with elements of historical fact (themselves fictionalized, of course) inevitably results in too much dramatic concentration on the figure of one rather dubious "hero"—the macho photo-journalist played by Nick Nolte. It is one thing to suggest, which *Under Fire* does quite effectively, that notions of journalistic "objectivity" are often a naïve illusion. But it is another thing altogether to suggest that simply by making a decision to take sides a single American journalist can bring about the downfall of an American-supported dictatorship which the people of Nicaragua have been fighting for fifty years.

Nonetheless, it is a measure of this film's integrity and depth of insight that it even offers one scene—perhaps the most telling moment in the film—where a Nicaraguan nurse tending the wounded in a makeshift Red Cross tent-hospital forces us, the audience, to reflect on the relative importance we are inclined to attach to even one lone American death—and on the relative unimportance, to the American people, of 50,000 dead Nicaraguans. Bitterly, but with calm lucidity, the Nicaraguan nurse points out to Joanna Cassidy's Claire (who has just witnessed on television the photographs depicting the slaying of her former lover and colleague, Alex, by the National Guard) that perhaps now, having experienced the death of one person close to her, this American woman might understand how Nicaraguans have felt about the 50,000 countrymen killed by Somoza with arms supplied by the US. Finally, after reflecting for a moment, the nurse offers the observation that "Maybe we should have killed an American journalist fifty years ago."

Still, in spite of this chilling reminder of a drastic imbalance in our scale of values, *Under Fire* places far too much dramatic emphasis on the exploits of Nick Nolte's macho journalist. In so doing, *Under Fire* seems to be creating yet another mythic figure who is likely to whet the audience's appetite for war —a war of liberation, perhaps, and with our sympathies, for once, on the side of the liberators, but still a taste for war.

Then, too, there is the sheer bravado of Nolte's portrayal of the derring-do of a photo-journalist who is always throwing himself into the thick of the fighting. In fact, shooting away with his camera alongside guerrillas who are shooting away with their rifles and machine-guns, Russell Price is in many ways an active participant in the combat. And *Under Fire* is chock-full of the exciting stuff of war movies: a sniper battle on a church rooftop, tanks versus urban guerrillas in the city streets, bombing attacks on suspected guerrilla-occupied sections of the cities, and numerous confrontations at military roadblocks (which the journalists invariably try to get through with an arrogant wave of their press cards).

The dangers of this kind of glorification of the war correspondent are perhaps best

illustrated by the example of the real-life photo-journalist Tim Page, on whose experiences the original story (by Clayton Frohman) which provided the point of departure for *Under Fire* was based. Page was one of the most outrageous of the "gonzo" journalists covering the story of American soldiers fighting stoned on drugs in Vietnam. Stoned much of the time himself, Page became a legend for the heedless abandon with which he threw himself into combat situations to get the "inside" picture of the war. Wounded numerous times, once seriously when part of his brain was blown away by enemy fire, Page reveled unabashedly in the often grotesque excitement of his exploits.

Michael Herr's book *Dispatches* quotes Page's reaction, after his brain was remade, to a request from a British publisher for a book which would "finally take the glamour out of war."

> Take the glamour out of war! I mean, how the bloody hell can you do *that*? Go and take the glamour out of a Huey, go take the glamour out of a Sheridan . . . Can *you* take the glamour out of a Cobra or getting stoned on China Beach? . . . Oh, war is *good* for you, you can't take the glamour out of that. It's like trying to take the glamour out of sex, trying to take the glamour out of the Rolling Stones . . . I mean, you *know* that, it just can't be done.

Fortunately, much of the wild-eyed craziness of the real-life Tim Page has been toned down in Ron Shelton's reworking of the original story. But *Under Fire* still manages to contribute, in some blatant as well as subtle ways, to the myth of the macho journalist as a contemporary adventurer of heroic proportions.

The film is better, however, in depicting some of the minor, behind-the-scenes characters who are representative of the role western intelligence (read, the CIA) plays in trying to prop up friendly dictators and stave off popular liberation movements. Especially memorable are Ed Harris (who played John Glenn in *The Right Stuff*) as the CIA-financed mercenary, a hired gun whose job it is to kill "on company business" whether in Chad or Nicaragua, and Jean-Louis Trintignant, who plays the suave French intelligence agent Marcel Jazy, who works for the CIA in order, so he says, to "save European civilization" from the "misguided" Marxists, who "for all the right reasons choose the wrong side."

What is remarkable about this made-for-a-mass-audience American movie is that *Under Fire* makes it perfectly clear that it is the American intelligence establishment and their anti-Sandinista cohorts who have chosen the wrong side in Nicaragua. Nonetheless, for all the well-justified sympathy this film displays for the Sandinista cause, it is disheartening to see how, in the depiction of the jubilant entry of the victorious Sandinista freedom-fighters into Managua, *Under Fire* misleadingly falsifies yet again the essential nature of the Sandinista movement. The film's final scene depicts a huge crowd of Nicaraguans being led in a clenched fist chant of "Rafael, Rafael, Rafael" by a strikingly attractive Sandinista woman, whose activities we have been kept abreast of throughout the film, and who is now portrayed as a kind of cheerleader for the revolution.

As if this isn't bad enough, the film depicts the crowd, which is repeating mindlessly the chant of "Rafael, Rafael, Rafael," as hoisting a flag-draped coffin on their shoulders. Presumably, the coffin is that of the fictional "Rafael," thus paralleling the earlier shots of Somoza disinterring the coffins of his father and brother (which shots at least depicted an event which historically did take place). This closing shot of *Under Fire* (which incorporates a purely fictional element into the factual events) tends to place the Sandinista entry into power in Nicaragua on the same plane, so to speak, as the exit from power of Somoza. It suggests that the political ideology of the government may change along with a change in leaders, but that the "cult of personality" which glorifies a single charismatic leader is just as characteristic of the Sandinista movement as it was of the Somoza regime.

This is altogether false in the case of Nicaragua. And a film which in other respects displays as much intelligence and integrity as does *Under Fire* ought also to have had the courage and honesty to explode what is, after all, one of America's most deeply entrenched sterotypes about revolutionary movements not only in Nicaragua but the world over.

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The Year of Living Dangerously: The Mysterious Orient, or Merely The Insensitive Western Observer?

At first glance, there are many similarities between *Under Fire* and *The Year of Living Dangerously*. Both films deal with western journalists attempting to cover Third World social upheavals they don't really understand. Both films feature romantic intrigues which are so prominently foregrounded (even compositionally, in the images) that they tend to relegate the social and political realities of the Third World to an exotic backdrop for romantic adventure. And both films highlight ethical dilemmas which journalists must confront when personal feelings and opinions—as well as interpersonal relationships—start to overlap their work as journalists.

Major differences exist, too, between these two films. *Under Fire,* although seriously flawed in its portrayal of the Sandinista movement in Nicaragua, nonetheless raises the political issues of the Nicaraguan revolution in sharply pointed fashion. On the other hand, *The Year of Living Dangerously,* although a slower-paced, more philosophically meditative film than the action-packed *Under Fire,* never seems to get beneath the surface of the political unrest brewing in Indonesia under President Sukarno in the mid-sixties. Perhaps Peter Weir, the Australian director of *The Year of Living Dangerously,* meant to point out, and thereby criticize, the shallowness of much western reporting of Third World political unrest. The problem is, however, that the film itself seems to fall into the same trap, repeatedly failing to probe beneath the surface of the events and issues it depicts. In the end, *The Year of Living Dangerously* offers us, yet again, the "mysterious Orient," although, to its credit, the film at least raises the question whether the Orient is really so mysterious or only appears so to the insensitive western observer.

Not that there is anything insensitive about cinematographer Russell Boyd's camera work in *The Year of Living Dangerously*. On the contrary, in Boyd's shots of a violent tropical downpour in mid-afternoon, or in his moody, foreboding shots of evening mist rising off the canals of Djakarta (actually, the film was shot in the Philippines), we can almost see the Orient evaporating—and becoming "mysterious"—before our very eyes.

Of course, many people today contend that age-old divisions between east and west are breaking down. There is a line in *Under Fire,* spoken by a woman guerrilla fighter in the Sandinista movement, to the effect that world issues can't be divided any more into east and west, but rather into north and south. Certainly, the trend seems to be turning in this direction ever more rapidly. Nonetheless, as *The Year of Living Dangerously* amply demonstrates, the different mind-sets associated with east and west still have a hold on the popular imagination, perhaps on both sides of the east/west cultural and political frontier.

In *The Year of Living Dangerously,* Guy Hamilton (played by Mel Gibson) is an Australian journalist assigned to cover Indonesia in mid-1965, a year which then Indonesian President Sukarno had declared Indonesia's "Year of Living Dangerously." (Sukarno had a slogan for each year, which he would announce in his annual Independence Day speech.) Arriving at Djakarta's airport, the young Australian journalist sees anti-imperialist slogans everywhere.

On his first evening in Djakarta, Guy Hamilton is introduced to the teeming, poverty-stricken world of the back-streets of Asian cities. As the newly arrived Australian journalist walks through a popular quarter of Djakarta, the "natives" refuse to play the passive, picturesque role of "local color." They hurl insults at the western "capitalist pig." They jostle him. They contemptuously brandish an Indonesia *kris* (machete) in his face, and they spit on his back. "Look, but don't touch" may be the rules of the game for westerners, but they are not necessarily the rules Third World peoples can be expected to play by.

On the other hand, confronted with this poverty, with this resentment of westerners, with this animosity towards capitalism, Guy Hamilton, the Australian journalist, can only fall back lamely on the journalist's proverbial "neutrality" and "objectivity." "We can't afford to get involved," Guy tells a fellow journalist. But his colleague disagrees. The colleague is Billy Kwan, a half-caste figure (Chinese father, Australian mother) who

THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

works as a photo-journalist.

The role of Billy Kwan embodies all the rich potential—and contradictions—of various sets of opposites. Of mixed parentage, Billy combines both east and west. And although Linda Hunt's excellent performance establishes Billy as a believably male protagonist within the fictional narrative of the film, we never completely lose sight of the fact that Billy is played by a woman. Far from being a flaw, however, this adds a dimension; as a synthesis of east and west, male and female, Billy Kwan becomes an almost mythic figure. And the film's scriptwriters play up the mythic aura emanating from Billy by having other characters refer to the pint-sized half-caste figure as a "dwarf," i.e., as someone essentially "different," half-feared for his/her innate connection to the mysterious dark powers of the universe. (Many of Peter Weir's films have characters believed to be in touch with supernatural powers: Miranda, in *Picnic at Hanging Rock,* and the aborigines, in *The Last Wave,* come immediately to mind.)

In the film's story-line, Billy functions as the go-between, the contact-man. He takes the inexperienced Guy under his tutelage. He offers Guy a friendship and a working partnership. Guy will supply the words and Billy will supply the pictures. Yet another dichotomy is explored in this film: the verbal and the visual as two different modes of understanding the world, a theme also implicit in *Under Fire.*

When Guy speaks of staying uninvolved, Billy cites St. Luke on the Christian obligation of charity to the poor and needy. Billy also cites Tolstoy's gesture of giving away much of what he owned to the downtrodden poor of Czarist Russia. Billy also speaks of the need for everyone "to add their light to the sum of light." But he acknowledges, as did Tolstoy, that sometimes this individual charity seems a futile gesture, a mere drop in the bucket, solving nothing, only salving momentarily the conscience of the one who gives.

Echoing Tolstoy, Billy repeats, throughout the film, the anguished question, "What then must be done?" It is a question also asked by Lenin; and the Communist response to this question haunts *The Year of Living Dangerously* like the specter Marx once declared it to be.

In the mid-sixties, Indonesia had the largest Communist party in the non-Communist world. President Sukarno, the revered hero of Indonesia's successful overthrow of Dutch colonialism, was by all accounts (not just those of western journalists) walking a precarious tightrope between the huge and powerful Indonesian Communist Party and the strongly right-wing, pro-western military establishment in Indonesia. Sukarno, as Billy Kwan puts it in *The Year of Living Dangerously,* was like a "master puppeteer" from the traditional Javanese shadow puppet theater. Balancing right and left, attempting to achieve a unity of opposites, Sukarno, says Billy, was not seeking answers of right and wrong, like the west, but rather a synthesis of all the conflicting elements.

One can see how Billy, himself embodying such a synthesis of different elements, would be drawn to identify with the figure of Sukarno. Indeed, many people admired Sukarno, although by the middle of 1965—when *The Year of Living Dangerously* picks up its fictionalized account of the situation—many in Indonesia were becoming impatient with Sukarno's balancing act and with the person-

ality cult surrounding him. In the film, Sukarno's charismatic presence is felt indirectly, in the myriad pictures and billboards depicting him in public places and in the many conversations about him on the part of western journalists covering Indonesia.

Wisely, director Peter Weir offers only cameo glimpses of Sukarno himself—acted by a look-alike sporting Sukarno's ubiquitous sunglasses and traditional red cap, or *petji.* About the only impression we are allowed to get of Sukarno himself is that he enjoys being the center of attention as the journalists hang around the presidential palace hoping for scraps of information to be dropped by Sukarno or his aides.

While Billy Kwan, unlike his cynical colleagues, declares himself an admirer of Sukarno's policies, he nonetheless chides the other journalists for not understanding that the real "story" of Indonesia lies in the crushing poverty of the rural villages and the back alley slums of the cities, among the people. Presumably at Billy's urging, Guy files a story on the famine-stricken province of Lombok (the same province depicted in Dutch filmmaker Fons Rademakers's excellent 1976 film, *Max Havelaar,* on Dutch colonial rule in nineteenth-century Indonesia). The main point of Guy's story on the Lombok famine, interestingly, is an *image*—"a recurring nightmare image of the gaunt rib cages and sunken eyes of starving children." We are not shown any such image (in fact, we only hear bits and pieces of Guy's story on the sound track); but his verbal image powerfully calls forth a visual image. Is it Biafra that has lodged such an image indelibly in our mind's eye?

Through Billy's extensive contacts, Guy is granted an exclusive interview with the head of the powerful Indonesian Communist Party, who divulges an agreement he allegedly has worked out with Sukarno whereby arms will be provided to the Indonesian peasants. The story is a major scoop for Guy; and he is treated with new respect—and more than a tinge of professional jealousy—by his press corps colleagues. But there is also some skepticism about the story, for, as several of Guy's colleagues point out, providing arms to the peasants would be an open invitation to civil war. (More on this aspect of the film—and on its problematic relation to historical fact—later in this essay.)

In *The Year of Living Dangerously,* the obligatory romantic intrigue pops up when Guy is introduced (by Billy) to Gillian Bryant, a young British woman (played by Sigourney Weaver). She works at the British Embassy in Djakarta as Assistant Military Attaché. ("You're a spook, aren't you?" asks Guy.) Predictably, a romance quickly develops between Guy and Gillian, with Billy serving as the go-between who brings them together. But Billy does more than set things up initially. He follows them about and surreptitiously photographs them at a dockside café where they go for drinks; he offers Guy the use of his cottage for a week (seemingly taking a vicarious pleasure in thereby being an intimate part of their romantic trysts); and he fills his personal files with photos and notes which chronicle their romance.

At one point, seated at his typewriter, reflecting on the personalities of those close to him, such as Guy and Gillian, or on the figure of Sukarno, with whom he strongly identifies, Billy muses aloud that "here on the printed page, as in the darkroom, I am a magic king, shuffling like cards the people I deal with." It is a revealing line, one which raises explicitly certain psychological issues pertinent not only to Billy Kwan's character but also, perhaps, to journalists in general, whose job it is to get close to those who make things happen, although they themselves are supposed merely to report on the actions of others. For the photographer Billy Kwan, however, it is not enough merely to be an observer. He wants to teach others how to see, and to act on what they see.

The idealism of Billy Kwan is far from being shared, however, by his press corps colleagues. In fact, the international press corps in *The Year of Living Dangerously* is depicted as a raucous, somewhat unsavory fraternity where cynicism and competitive careerism are endemic. (*The Year of Living Dangerously* certainly paints a harsher, far less heroic picture of journalists than does *Under Fire.*) Director Peter Weir even underscores the fundamentally exploitative relations some of the foreign journalists have with their Indonesian host nationals in *The Year of Living Dangerously.* This is demonstrated most

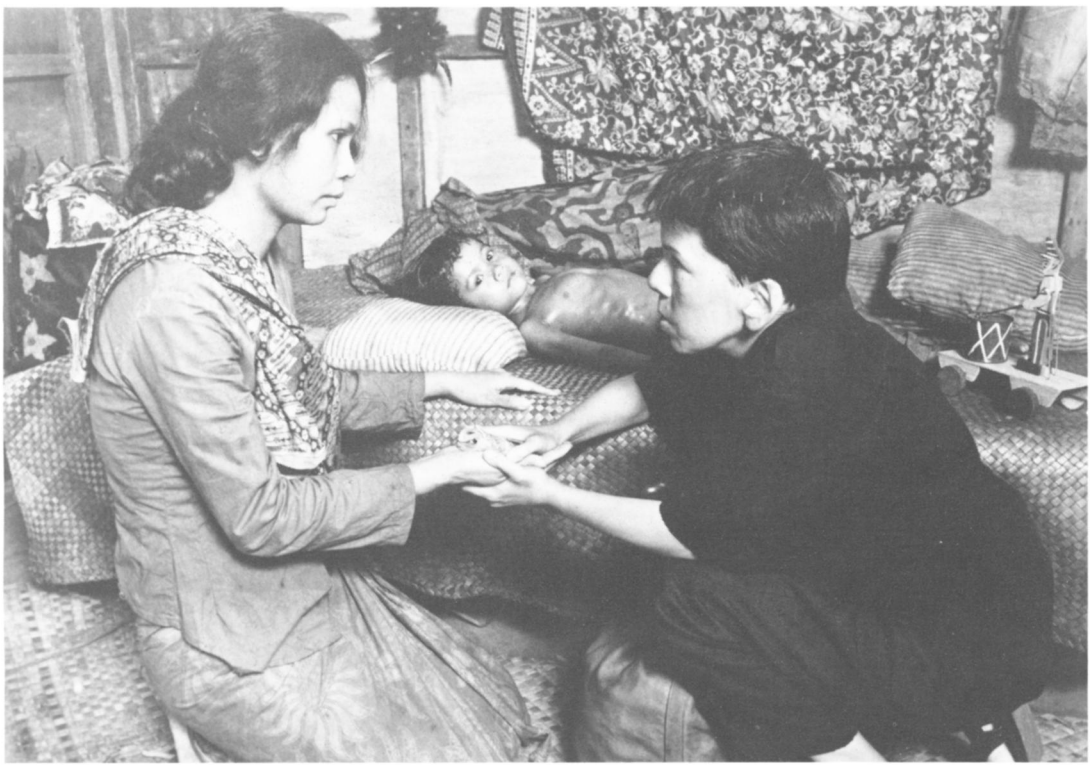
graphically in several vignettes involving an obnoxiously abrasive American journalist (the "ugly American" par excellence) who spends most of his time in Indonesia boozing and cruising the back alley whores of Djakarta (whom he refers to as "the best and cheapest ass in Asia"), or in a scene involving a paunchy, sybaritic British journalist who exploits sexually the local "boys" he hires as servants.

By contrast, the idealistic Billy Kwan puts into practice his personal creed of charity, providing money and bags of rice to a young Indonesian woman and her sickly child whom he has encountered in his frequent wanderings in the backwater canal district of Djakarta. But Billy is utterly devastated when his benevolent intentions prove fruitless and the child dies. Even the romance which he believes he has fostered between Guy and Gillian eventually turns into a source of disappointment for Billy. And Billy seems to take it harder than anyone when Guy betrays the trust of Gillian by insisting on pursuing a story told to him in strictest confidence by Gillian.

The story is a journalistic whopper—a huge shipment of arms allegedly en route for clandestine delivery to peasants and cadres of the Indonesian Communist Party. Guy determines to track down independent confirmation of this ominous development even though Gillian begs him not to do so. Not only will her own position inevitably be compromised (everyone will automatically assume that she has passed on to Guy a confidential message she has intercepted in her work as a British military intelligence agent); but she also pleads that her only intention in telling him of this news was to persuade him to leave Indonesia before the arms shipment brings on a civil war in which he, along with all foreigners, would very likely be the first victims.

Leaving the film's fictional plot aside for the moment, it is interesting to note that the film suggests only in an indirect and roundabout way—through the device of Guy's aforementioned interview with the Indonesian Communist Party chief—that there is solid historical basis for speculation that Sukarno gave his personal blessing to the decision to deliver arms secretly to the Indonesian peasants and communist cadres. In fact, although *The Year of Living Dangerously* doesn't men-

THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY: *Billy Kwan and the woman he brings money and food*



tion this, Sukarno actually announced, in his Independence Day speech, August 17, 1965, his support of a Communist Party proposal to create a so-called "fifth force" of armed peasants. Officially, this force was supposed to supplement the army, navy, air force and police, although many observers conjectured that its real purpose might be to serve as a left-wing counter-force to the right-wing military establishment.

Sukarno did not, however, officially create such a force, nor did he openly provide the peasants with arms. There is speculation that he might have arranged to provide them with arms secretly (as *The Year of Living Dangerously* seems to imply). But even if this were the case, Sukarno's motive in doing so is not clear. Would he have been seeking to encourage a rebellion which would then give him a pretext to suppress the communists (which is what actually happened); or would he have been hoping that such a move would strengthen the political hand of the left in his own balancing act with the right-wing military establishment? *The Year of Living Dangerously* shies away from such issues. In fact, viewers unfamiliar with Indonesian history could hardly be expected to understand from the film that, following the events depicted, there ensued a bloodbath in which hundreds of thousands of communists, suspected communists and communist sympathizers were killed by government troops, thus decimating the huge communist movement; and that within a year Sukarno, too, was gone, victim of a military coup led by General Suharto.

To its credit, however, *The Year of Living Dangerously* sensitively offers a sympathetic portrayal of the aspirations for social justice and a better life which attracted vast numbers of Indonesians to the communist cause. And the knee-jerk anti-communism of the west is thrown sharply into question. As Guy Hamilton's Indonesian assistant (himself an active cadre in the Communist Party) puts it, "If there is nothing wrong with our wanting to better the living conditions of our people, then why do you westerners always oppose us?" And when Guy admits that he has no adequate answer, his Indonesian assistant retorts that "Billy Kwan was right, westerners don't have answers anymore."

Guy Hamilton tries to talk his way past a roadblock: THE YEAR OF LIVING DANGEROUSLY

Billy Kwan, however, by the end of the film, is dead. Gradually, Billy had come to an acute realization of the dire urgency of the plight of Indonesia's impoverished masses. In the face of such urgency, Billy had come to find Djakarta's ubiquitous billboard-sized images of Sukarno something almost obscene. Starving people were given nothing but an image. Disillusioned with images, Billy had turned to words. In a symbolic act of protest, Billy had draped a huge banner reading (in English) "Sukarno, Feed Your People" out the window of a prominent hotel in mid-town Djakarta, along the route to be followed by a Sukarno motorcade to a huge public rally. But the banner had only roused the wrath of the security police, who had stormed the hotel to find the culprit. Whether pushed by the irate police, or perhaps having thrown himself out the window in an act of martyrdom, Billy had plummeted to his death.

The film offers no easy solutions to the social and political issues facing Indonesia. Nor does this film, unlike *Under Fire,* offer any heroic action with which the western journalist can step in to alter the course of history. The gesture of Billy Kwan is lucidly acknowledged to be futile: Sukarno doesn't even get to see the offending banner, and neither the banner itself nor Billy's death is likely to change things. Even Guy Hamilton, Billy's closest friend, seems unable to do anything constructive. When he hears news that an armed rebellion has started, and that government troops are ringing the presidential palace (is it to protect Sukarno or to make him a prisoner of the military?), Guy arrogantly attempts to walk right through the military cordon sealing off the palace. With his microphone and tape recorder in hand, he is knocked senseless by

a blow to the face with the butt end of a rifle wielded by an Indonesian officer (who actually seems to be saving Guy's life by not shooting him on the spot).

After being treated for a serious injury to one eye, Guy decides to risk a mad dash to the airport to join Gillian on a flight out of the country. In a harrowing ride past military convoys carrying out roadside executions, Guy and his Indonesian assistant are finally waved through one last military roadblock and succeed in reaching the airport. As Guy tells his assistant to take the car and head for the mountains to avoid the purge of communists, this dedicated, low-ranking *cadre* looks Guy calmly in the face and declares simply that "In the end, we will win. We believe in something."

It is a moving line; and, in the long run, it is a fairly persuasive line. One is left with the impression that although the right-wing military may succeed in setting back the communist movement for years, or even decades, it will never eradicate a movement which is sustained by such a sincere and determined quest for social justice on the part of Indonesia's impoverished masses. By contrast, Guy Hamilton's decision to flee the country by joining Gillian on the last flight out seems not only a trite ending but also an example of the ultimate fall-back position of even the sympathetic westerner, who, when the going gets rough, can always make a fast exit.

In this respect—and in spite of the romantic mush of the film's final shot of Gillian embracing Guy with open arms as he boards the plane—the downbeat ending of *The Year of Living Dangerously* strikes me as far more realistic (that is to say, more politically lucid) than the upbeat ending of *Under Fire,* in which the two American journalists offer themselves a self-congratulatory moment ("I'd do it all again") for having successfully aided the revolution. It's not that I am pessimistic about the chances for successful revolution (in Nicaragua, Indonesia, or elsewhere). It's just that I am doubtful, to say the least, that such revolutions will be made possible by heroic choices made by *gringo* journalists. Such notions of individual heroism may be the conventional stuff of Hollywood films (including *Under Fire*), but, whatever other failings *The Year of Living Dangerously* may have, this film at least spares us *Under Fire*'s naïve and arrogant vision of Third World revolution made possible through the courtesy of individual western journalists.

GIDEON BACHMANN

The Carrots Are Cooked

A Conversation with Jean-Luc Godard

When Jean-Luc Godard received the grand prize at last year's Venice Film Festival from a jury composed largely of directors of his generation, it was widely felt that it was an award for his stubbornness in trying to renew the language of cinema with each sortie and perhaps an acknowledgement of past contributions to it. I don't remember a single critic who at the time thought *Prénom: Carmen* was a masterpiece in itself.

The film utilizes the syntax invented for *Sauve qui peut: la vie,* but more linear than *Passion;* we are dealing now with disappointment. The coordinates of Working Class Crust and Is Art Life? are there as before, but the graph Godard dances in their field of interaction is nothing so much as the balancing act of a miser reluctant to eschew engagement in favor of a defeatist rationale. *Prénom: Carmen* is ambivalence on the level of art.

The intentions seem clear, on the face of it. Godard shows the struggle of the sexes in a more modern and perhaps sadder way than Bizet did in shaping his romantic musical ver-

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sion of the book by Prosper Merimée. We are in modern France where a gang of youths are about to rob a bank and stage a kidnap under the guise of a low-budget film-making enterprise. Carmen (Maruschka Detmers) is the mascot of the gang and she enlists her uncle (Godard himself), a former film director now living in an asylum, to help by providing a mantle of respectability and a location (a mythical villa he is supposed to possess), but who in fact contributes nothing but epithets. Don José (Jacques Bonaffé) is a cop who grabs her at the bank but the grab becomes sexual there on the marble slats, et cetera, et cetera—except that once she's got him she won't have him again. Click: the male of the eighties.

The attempt to find out how far one can go in breaking down the traditional ways of making films here carries Godard to self-imposed extremes: he says, for example, that he can use only two sound tracks because he has only two hands. So when the two tracks are taken up by music and the sound of waves, there is no track for dialogue and the actors mouth their lines in silence. And mixing is against his grain, too, so sounds (including musical cadences) stop and start in the middle. Not to speak of the disconnectedness of images long his trademark.

●

Any particular comment on the title, Prenom: Carmen*?*

In the film there is a question: "What is there before the name?" People always want to know what things are called. Do things always have to be called by a name? Maybe the things just come to us without being called by a specific name. I think that the cinema should show things before they receive a name, so that they can be given a name, or that we can give in to the business of naming them.

Today we live in an epoch of total power being given to all forms of rhetoric, a time of terrorism of language which is further accentuated by television. I, as a modest employee of the cinema, have an interest to speak of things before words and names take over, to speak of the child before daddy and mummy give it a name. To speak of myself before I hear myself being called Jean-Luc. To speak of the sea, of liberty, before they are being called sea, waves or freedom.

Carmen is a great feminine myth which exists only through music, and I can well understand that quite a few film directors in this epoch might feel that they want to make a film of it. Maybe in this moment the media feel a need to take over this myth, maybe it's the time for the last struggle between women and men or maybe the time for the first struggle of women against men.

I like dealing with things that may soon no longer exist or dealing with things which do not exist yet. Thus the real title of the film could be *Before the name.* Before language, in other words, *Before Language (Children playing Carmen).*

Why Beethoven?

I didn't choose Beethoven, it's Beethoven, in a way, who chose me. I followed the call. When I was 20 myself, which is the age of the characters in my film, I had listened to Beethoven at the seashore, in Brittany, the last Quartets, and discovered the Quartets there. Now, Hamlet or Electra can exist without music, but not Carmen. Thus music is part of the history of Carmen; in fact, the book by Merimée was never famous until it was made famous through Bizet's putting it to music. Bizet was a composer whose music Nietzsche called "brown," but which is the music of the Mediterranean, since he was a composer of the south, very much connected to the sea. So I did not only pick a different music but also a different sea.

I preferred the ocean to the Mediterranean, and what I wanted was to have what I would call "fundamental" music. I wanted music which had marked the history of music itself, both its practice and theory, and the Beethoven Quartets represent this. I could have chosen Bach, something like Das Wohltemperierte Klavier, music which stands for all the theory and all the practice of music which has so far existed, and which gives work to all the musicians of past and present throughout history. In fact, in my next film, I will use Bach.

About the title, I wanted to add that I feel that everybody knows the story of Carmen but nobody knows what really happened between Don José and Carmen or between Joseph and Carmen nor how it actually went:

people know how it started and they know how it will end, but not how to get from the beginning to the end, and that's what this means, the telling of stories: to show how it went.

The big difference with the Carmen films made by Rosi or Saura is that theirs are illustrations of a classic theme, whereas we tried to find what a man and a woman have said to each other, dominated by that image of love which weighs upon them, the name which is given to their love or to their adventure from the beginning, things like "destiny" or "love" or "curse." If they are in a kitchen, what did they say? If they are in a car, what did they say? Nobody knows.

In my next film, I shall keep the same characters, they will be called Joseph and Maria, and it will concern what Joseph and Maria said to each other before having a child. So you could say this one is just a preparation for my next film. My films always announce the next one. Of course I try not to announce catastrophes . . .

You played a role in your film this time . . .

Yes, to amuse myself, and in order to see if one really amuses oneself being an actor. I have always had relations with actors which are at the same time very tender and very violent. The same as with my technicians. And for once I wanted to see myself from the front and not from the back.

I was also doing it because I want to prepare myself to play the principal part in a film, something like Harry Langdon did or a bit like Jerry Lewis, whom, as you know, I greatly admire.

For once I didn't want only my spirit to work but my body as well, and my voice. I thought that it would be a good idea, for technical reasons, to play upon my name, something that was not totally me although it was also me, so that one could believe to some extent the thing one sees. Like the musicians, whom you actually see in the film, so the one who invents the story is also part of the story.

You mean normal actors can not be believed easily?

I always let the actors do absolutely all the things they want to, I just put them into certain conditions. Normally they think these conditions are easy but often they discover

Marushka in PRENOM: CARMEN
[*Photos from the screen:* GIDEON BACHMANN]

that they are quite hard, and they have to save themselves. If they have said to me that they can swim I try to throw them in the sea and see how they swim. That's all my work with actors.

Love in the Cinema . . .

Love in the cinema or love *of* the cinema . . . In military films it's the love of young men for guns, and in gangster films it's the love of young men for stealing; and in the cinema that's the achievement of the Nouvelle Vague, of Truffaut and Rivette and myself and a few others: to have brought back to the cinema something that had gone out of it, namely the love of the cinema itself. We loved cinema before loving women, before loving money, before loving war. It's the cinema that made me discover life and it took me 30 years, in fact, because I had to get through all those things which I myself projected on the screen . . . but without love, there is no film.

And if cinema today still works on television, it's because television itself has no love.

Television substitutes what?

On television you can find power in its pure state, and the only things that people like seeing on TV at all are sports and cinema films, and that is because they seek love and they have learned that they need to go towards the screen in order to go towards others. And of course in modern life we do not manage to go towards others, and thus we have learned to accept the fact that we are somewhat impotent—we are not powerful, potent like the men of the military or the scientists or the television people themselves that one sees on television—we are somewhat impotent.

In fact, we admit that we are impotent. On the other hand, we have it, the good intention to move out, to go forward, to project, to touch others. And the others, on their side,

put in a lot of good intentions as well to come and meet us. There is the goodwill for a meeting: that's the cinema. The cinema is the love, the meeting, the love of ourselves and of life, the love of ourselves on earth, it's a very evangelical matter, and it's not by chance that the white screen is like a canvas. In my next film I want to use it in this way, the screen as the linen of Veronique, the shroud that keeps the trace, the love, of the lived, of the world.

There is no film without love, love of some kind. There can be novels without love, other works of art without love, but there can be no cinema without love.

So you cannot do it alone? Cannot be an "author"?

I find it useless to keep offering the public the "auteur." In Venice, when I got the prize of the Golden Lion I said that I probably deserve only the mane of this lion, and maybe the tail. Everything in the middle should go to all the others who work on a picture: the paws to the director of photography, the face to the editor, the body to the actors. I don't believe in the solitude of an artist and the auteur with a capital A. The American cinema wouldn't exist today if it hadn't been for great producers like Irving Thalberg [whose entire method was based on delegating preplanned scripts to directors to make.—G. B.] In general, there is a tendency today to consider the problems of the director without thinking that behind him there are many other figures equally important in the making of the film.

The sound engineers, for example? You pay ever more attention to sound now.

I have always paid considerable attention to the sound track; I think we were among the first to use direct sound. I stopped going to Italian films, in fact, when I found out, by filming in Italy, that nobody there recorded the sound at all and they make it all up later. Mind you, there is a great musical tradition in Italy, which makes it all even more ridiculous. I don't think there should be a conflict between the sound and the image. That's why there is the sea in my film and the music, and the music is part of the action and I planned it so it should be part of the action and that it should not at all be like in the film that Saura made of Carmen, a literary pretext to show that the musicians are playing . . . if the musicians should stop playing I would have no more ideas.

If you take *Alexander Nevsky* by Eisenstein, for example, the battle scenes, these were first written in the form of a score by Prokofief and this gave Eisenstein ideas; he had the score changed and then they shot the scenes in accordance with the music they had worked on together. My film has much less ambition but three quarters of the scenes in my film were also made in this way. For example, the attack on the bank came to be after I heard a certain part of the 10th Quartet and I understood, since I was planning this film, in which there was to be a crime element, I understood that Carmen could in fact be part of a small gang and so then came the idea that Don José is a policeman and in this way we came back to the real story of Carmen.

The music has a certain control over the images, and there are places in the film where the scenes become a bit autonomous or simplistic or even vulgar, like in a few of the love scenes between the protagonists, and then the music comes and takes over as if it were saying, "Come on, let's go, let's go on, this is serious . . ."

Everybody knows this, it has been said again and again, and not only about Carmen, music announces the events ["la musique annonce les evenements"], it presages history, as it were, and even people like Mitterand's advisers know this, and if the politicians would only listen to the music of the people, they might know better what goes on.

So I don't think that what I am doing with sound is new, I think I have always paid as much attention to it and given it great importance. I find myself, in fact, being quite original in what I do, and maybe alone.

For example, all my films since *Sauve qui peut* have only two mixing tracks. You know, in the cinema, when it comes to making up the final sound track, there are always many original tapes—the sound of a car arriving at the beach, for example, the voices of the actors getting out of it and saying "I love you" or the opposite, the sound of the waves behind them, maybe a cock crowing in a nearby farm, and some music. That makes five tracks . . . and I have only two hands to manipulate them . . . if I had only one arm, maybe I'd have only a single sound

track. All this business of having the various sounds marching up in front of you like soldiers is called mixing and I can only control it with the two hands I have. I don't mind putting a cock on the track if we are in a farm but all these sounds—there isn't the space . . . so I prefer to work very carefully on the sound and put in only that which is the important sound of the moment.

We all have only two hands . . .

Exactly. Take Rodin, the sculptor. In the planning stage of *Prénom: Carmen,* we had love scenes, which in the end did not become real love scenes in the film, and we wanted to make them like certain Rodin sculptures. In the end the actors didn't like the idea and we didn't do it like that, but we continued to call the love scenes "the Rodin scenes." And then when I did the cutting of the film and the sound editing and mixing, the idea I had had of Rodin was the same idea: the sculptor works with two hands against a surface, he carves space, and since musicians are always speaking of audible space I think that the thing I'd like to lead them to do is to carve this audible space.

And in filming the ones who execute the music, I was striving for a physical feeling of music, especially with the violin, where I really had the feeling of carving. So this is how connections arise and you say to yourself, "After the view of a violin which is carving what is the image to show next?" Obviously the image of a sea which does the same, carving with waves and crevasses, highs and lows, and as long as you are dealing with highs and lows you say, "Well, there are two people there who will have moments of high and low feeling," and this is how it all hangs together, completely logically, that's the cinema. There is nothing invented in the cinema.

All you can do in the cinema is observe and try and put in order that which one has seen *if* one has been able to see well.

Is that what you have tried to do in your cinema always?

"Always" is a big word; I have no "style," I just want to make films. If I have influenced young film-makers, who are a bit like my children or my brothers or who may have been my parents before I started, the only influence that I cared for was to show them that to make a film was a possible thing. It is not

Godard as Uncle Jean who inhabits the lunatic asylum in PRENOM: CARMEN

true that only if you have a great deal of money can you make a film. If you have a lot of money it is just a different kind of film that you will make. If you have no money, you can still make a film . . .

What is your position then, as a film-maker?

It is a position in the margin. But that is normal. No book can exist without a margin, and whether I watch a tennis or a football match, I am always in the margin, in relation to the players, that is, I am in the place of the public, of the onlookers. In fact, to be in the margin, that is the real position of the public. It is a necessary position. That which is seen cannot be seen without those who see it.

As far as technique is concerned, I am beginning to understand my position fairly clearly in front of the overall power of television . . . I am sure that in 20 years I wouldn't even have the right to a position as a sweeper in the RAI studios [Italian Television.—G.B.], even that they would refuse me. So I must either try and save myself or try to collaborate with others who are also trying to save themselves. It could be the Palestinians, and although I may not need to go and see them I can at least listen to what they have to say; or it could be a musician, or it could be Picasso, or an unknown person, and I am beginning to understand the drama that it must have been for certain great film directors when sound and color came, like Keaton, who succumbed, or like Chaplin, who took time to succumb, or when others rose in their stead.

Cinema has always been a great popular art, and that is the idea upon which the History of Cinema will be based which I am now preparing for the Fourth Channel of French Television—to show that there were unusual cultural forces at work here, since they were

and are unique to the cinema: this immediacy of mass distribution.

Painting had never known this, Mozart was played for the princes, it wasn't like it could have been today, where every morning millions could listen to Mozart. Beethoven was heard only by a few in his time, Goya was seen by even less. But the cinema—even in the Grand Café of Lumière it was seen by 100 people at once, and today, too, it is seen everywhere, at once. There was and is something profoundly popular in the cinema, whether you are seeking this effect or not.

Mostly this is the result of monetary considerations, but this isn't the only cause. *Birth of a Nation* by Griffith was made for money, but Griffith had other aims besides, and these aims were democratically distributed. And don't forget that sound came to the cinema in the depression, the word arrived on the screen in times of unemployment, in the time that Roosevelt came to power, and in the time when Hitler was beginning to take over in Germany.

When I say "the word" I do not mean the "real" word, the word of philosophers or lovers, but I mean the words of those in power, the same ones who today are installed or, rather, those who today have installed themselves behind the technique of television, causing the decline of the images. There are no more images today. As Jean-Pierre Gorin used to say in the time we worked together: "Films are no longer seen, they are read."

For this reason it is not as interesting as it could be to participate in many round-table discussions or conferences, even with people of good will and good intentions, because these are all discussions without the object: it's like parents wishing their children well and discussing, in the child's absence, what the child might most wish to have, without asking the child if it prefers a bicycle or chocolate or a bank account. Nobody today really knows or listens to those in the margin, the viewers.

"Video" means "I see," but what is happening is that with the complicity of the masses video becomes the medium of those who do not want to see.

And the position of your technicians?

I have always been very well supported and aided by my technicians. I am a person who likes to receive; the camera, for example, for me cannot be a rifle, since it is not an instrument that sends out but an instrument that receives. And it receives with the aid of light. That's why I say that the photography in my films is made by three people, three factors: me, who says, that's how we will shoot it; Coutard, my cameraman, second, who accepts to do what I ask him to; and, in the third place, an old friend from long ago, Kodak. Coutard is a man who accepts to work without artificial light and still makes his work interesting. He accepts to see that a light that comes in from behind a curtain is not the same thing as a light that comes in through a door and he tries to understand this and to reflect upon it. And he agrees to consider together with us whether this is a light that should be reconstructed or a light that ought to be left as it is. And Kodak is preferable to Fuji, and this is why I have put it in the credits of this film.

I think the Japanese are right in their claim for Fuji film when they say that it makes Africa reinvent its colors, because in effect what we are doing in the cinema and on television is shoot everything on the level of white or on the level of grey, because it is all done in relation to the white skin and not in relation to the slightly dull skin color of the Japanese or the slightly yellowish skin color of the Eskimos, or the black skin of the blacks.

In fact, black and white are the most difficult colors. And it is difficult to convince them in the laboratories to even try, because they are dominated by what television demands, which is an image which has lighting but no light.

In my films there is always very little lighting; in fact Isabelle Adjani, who was supposed to make this film with me, was frightened by this fact, she thought she wasn't pretty enough or wouldn't be in this film, and we agreed to disagree and I made the film with Marushka Detmers. Adjani thought, like all stars, that a lot of lighting, a lot of spots, is a guarantee for their appearing beautifully on the screen. She could not accept that daylight, slightly corrected, could be a much better guarantee for her beauty.

That's why I had all this difficulty, and why without Raoul Coutard I couldn't have made the film, because I mixed daylight with artifi-

cial light and only he agreed to do this. Thus we have in some shots a warm light on one side and a cold light on the other; you could say this is an ultra-classic film, after all, Carmen blows hot and cold . . . it is a film which is constantly between hot and cold, and the images express what is happening in the emotions.

For the cinema, your final words in the film, "This is called dawn," could well be changed to "This is called dusk" . . .

It is true that for the cinema I have a sentiment of dusk, but isn't that the time when the most beautiful walks are taken? In the evening, when the night falls and there is the hope for tomorrow? Lovers rarely ever walk about hand in hand at seven o'clock in the morning . . . for me, dusk is a notion of hope rather than of despair.

There is something, however, that I am beginning to find very beautiful in the cinema, something very human which gives me the desire to continue working in it until I die, and that is precisely that I say to myself that the cinema and myself may die at the same time . . . and when I say "cinema" I mean cinema as it was invented. In other words, cinema, which deals in human gestures and actions (unlike painting or music and dance) in their reproduction, can probably only last, such as it was invented, for the duration of a human life. Something between 80 and 120 years . . .

This means that it is true that the cinema is a passing thing, something ephemeral, something that goes by . . . of course, today they are trying to stock them on cassettes, but the more videocassettes you buy, the less time you have to watch them . . . so it seems that collecting cassettes means something else, it's a form of stockpiling provisions, not a form of eating one's provisions. Some kind of safeguard for the future.

So I now accept that cinema is ephemeral. It is true that at times I felt differently, that I lamented the future, that I said "What will become of us?" or "How terrible," but now I see that I have lived this period of cinema very fully.

You mean you are happy it's over?

It may not be, but one period of it is. My parents lived its first period; they didn't tell me about it; I had to discover it myself with the help of people like Langlois and some others, in museums, but I have lived my own period fully, my road is marked, I will last this precise time.

I already see the new times, such as they are, and I have always been interested in the new; television . . . anyway, soon there will be no more images on television but only text . . . it has already begun . . . you will no longer see an image of carrots which you can buy in a supermarket and the price you may have to pay, because it would take a Flaherty or a Rouch or a Godard to film them, and if they took me I would get interested in the cashier and I'd start to tell a story. . . but you will just be told in words, "The carrots are cooked." That is the cinema of tomorrow and already that of today. For me, this is quite a gay conclusion.

SCOTT MacDONALD

Cinema 16: An Interview with Amos Vogel

Amos Vogel's impact on North American film awareness is impossible to measure. In 1946, with the help of his wife Marsha, he founded what soon became, with 7,000 members, one of the most successful and influential film societies in American history: Cinema 16. For seventeen years he supplied New Yorkers with regular screenings of dramatic features, social and political documentaries, avant-garde work, animation, scientific films . . . every interesting, challenging form of film he could find, some 1,000 films in all. To

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my knowledge, he was the first to present dozens of significant film-makers to American audiences: Antonioni, Franju, Bresson, Ozu, Truffaut, Varda, Polanski, Oshima, Conner, Brakhage, Anger, McLaren, Richardson, Lenica, Breer, Rivette and Casavetes, to name just a few. And he did it all without a penny of public or private support beyond the cost of individual memberships. When he finally ended Cinema 16 in 1963, he went on to co-found (with Richard Roud) the New York Film Festival. In 1974 Random House published his *Film as a Subversive Art,* an extensive and fascinating critical dictionary of films which have as a central concern the subversion of the film viewer's consciousness. He is presently a professor at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications, and writes regularly for *Film Comment.*

The following interview was recorded in two sessions during February/March, 1983. Vogel has checked the interview for accuracy.

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Were you involved in film before you arrived in this country?

I was born in 1921 in Vienna, Austria. Even as a kid I was interested in cinema. I owned a 9 1/2 mm camera and a hand-cranked projector. I went to many, many films, and was a member of a large film society in Vienna. One film that was a shattering experience for me, and led me in the direction I later took, was *Night Mail,* the British documentary by Basil Wright. It showed me that one can make a film about a so-called "uninteresting," seemingly unimportant subject—the British Post Office—and create a beautiful work of art, something that moved people, that moved me certainly, and gave me new insights. I also saw a lot of commercial films in Vienna, both European and American.

Hitler came to Austria in 1938 and stated that he and I could not live in the same country. He had more power than I did, so I left—I was lucky enough to still be able to leave—and came to New York in 1939. I was a student, did all kinds of odd jobs, tried to make a living. I was very involved with modern art, attended and loved the fabulous art lectures by Meyer Schapiro. But I had absolutely no intention of becoming involved in film in a professional way.

At a certain point after I came to New York I became aware that there were a lot of films around, in 16mm, which were not being shown publicly, and which were not available anywhere for me to see. Once in a while I'd get to see one at a local university, or I would read about them. I'm *not* talking about avant-garde films here. There were always two components to Cinema 16: what are now called avant-garde films, and what might be called nonfiction films, or documentary, including scientific studies, psychological studies, informational films, educational films. . . . I'd read about them in a local newspaper, or somebody I met (not a film person, but a member of a union or a teacher who had seen a film) would mention something to me. I found out who the distribution companies of the films were; I went to them and said, "Well, how can I see your films?" and found out it would be very expensive to rent them and that I'd have to get my own projector. I didn't have the money.

How did you first learn about avant-garde film?

There was a film magazine—it lasted for only three issues—called *Cinema,* run by Eli Wilenski—I think that's what his name was in those days. (Years later, under the name Eli Wilentz, he became the owner of the most important, and by far the best bookstore in New York City: the 8th Street Bookstore.) That magazine mentioned that Sidney Peterson and James Broughton had made one or two films that sounded very interesting: surrealist films, poetic films. He may also have mentioned Kenneth Anger. Another person, of course, was Maya Deren. She had begun to show films in New York and had begun to write. I saw her films and was very impressed by them.

It occurred to me that if I was interested in such films—both avant-garde and documentary—and couldn't see them, there must be other people in a city the size of New York would be equally interested. Maybe I should get some of these films together and attempt to show them publicly. Maybe enough people would come to see them to pay for the film rental, and the whole thing would take care of itself. So, as a spare time activity my wife

Marcia and I, and a couple of our friends, decided to see if we could get a little money together and rent the same theater that Maya Deren had rented, the Provincetown Playhouse, and put on a program of these films. Next step: I went back to film distributors and convinced them to let me look at films for free on their premises because I was going to try to show them publicly afterwards. Many of them agreed. I chose a first program and decided to put ads in the papers.

Do you remember the films?

Yes. One of them was *Lamentation,* a dance film with Martha Graham; another was Sidney Peterson's *The Potted Psalm;* there was an animated film by Philip Stapp called *Boundarylines;* Julian Huxley's film on ape behavior—*Monkey Into Man*—produced by Stuart Legg; and Douglass Crockwell's *Glens Falls Sequence.* The Provincetown Playhouse had 200 seats. We announced showings for six o'clock and eight o'clock one evening. It was a huge smashing immediate success. We had to repeat this first program for *16* evenings! (With two showings per evening.) My naive but logical supposition was immediately proven correct. I have no doubt that if I had chosen other films, I would have done just as well, so long as they made for a well-rounded program.

How do you account for that much interest? At a lot of theaters where independent film is shown now, there are audiences sometimes of half a dozen people.

The situation now is totally different. But, how I account for it then is that there was a large, untapped reservoir of people who could not see these films in *any* other way. At the present time in New York we have at least seven showcases for independent cinema. They're splitting the audience, whatever the audience is, because they all show films simultaneously. In those days there was *only* Cinema 16. Another reason is the absence of television. Though television isn't showing very much of this kind of film, as we both know, once in a while there's something on PBS, or wherever; and in any case, television draws audiences away from film.

Within three years, Cinema 16 reached approximately 5,000 annual members. Later we averaged 7,000. We're talking about a large group of people, but at the same time, also

Joseph Vogel's HOUSE OF CARDS

a very small group—there are seven million people in New York. In any case, this idea worked, not because of my excellence, but because historical circumstances allowed Cinema 16 to fulfill a real social need. Very quickly, we realized that planning to show films on a one-shot basis, on one evening, was not a very good idea. For the second program we put on, we thought of expanding and adding weekend shows and really building the audience, so we spent the $1000 we had received as wedding presents on expanded advertising, including an ad in the *Times.* Well, that second program took place on the evening of the worst blizzard in New York history. There were four people at the theater: the projectionist, myself, Marcia, and some crazy person who came through the snow. We lost a thousand dollars immediately and the whole thing was a big flop; we were faced with an immediate catastrophe because we had absolutely no funds. The operating costs of theater, staff, film rental and advertising had been too large. Then my father, who had been a lawyer in Vienna and knew about the business world, told us we could try to keep going on credit, hoping that income from the next shows would pay for what we spent and leave us with a little surplus. This is exactly what we did; we were so naive that we had never even heard of doing business this way!

A second problem we ran into was even more serious, and more interesting. It started on the first evening. A representative of the New York State Censorship Office came to the theater and said, "Listen, you can't show this program, because your films have not been submitted to the censors, and have not

MOMMA DON'T ALLOW, *directed by Tony Richardson—early British "Free Cinema" documentary*

been approved by them." I said, "I don't know anything about that. I know there's some kind of censorship for Hollywood films, but what's this got to do with me?" He said, "Every film that's shown publicly in New York has to be okayed by us. You have to have a censorship seal." I said, "Look, what are you going to do? I want to show these films." And they looked at me and realized that I'm not a conniving businessman, but some kind of naive young guy who really didn't know. And they said, "OK, you can show this program, but after this, you have to submit all your films to us."

When I began to submit films to them (we started with our second program), we ran into impossible problems. Example: part of the censorship law was that you had to submit a copy of the script; I wanted to show a French animated film for children which had a nonsense language sound track. I had no script. We had to hire a stenotypist, who came and took down "ba ba, booboo . . ." We had to pay the stenotypist some fantastic sum, like $20 an hour, equivalent to $40 an hour now. We didn't have the money to do that. Remember, scripts existed for MGM films, but not for ten-year-old British documentaries or Bulgarian comedies! Secondly, we had to rent the films from the distributors early to submit them to the censors, who sat on them for at least a week. And they were doing me a favor; they were doing them very fast! So we had to pay high rental fees because the distributors weren't going to be able to use the films for two weeks. Thirdly, some films—Peterson's and Broughton's, for example—used nudes; sometimes there was some sexy business. Well, the censors applied the same standards to us that they applied to Hollywood films. There was a film by Maya Deren and Alexander Hammid—she was married to him at the time—called *The Private Life of a Cat*. It was a beautiful documentary of their cats at home. This film included birth sequences, which made the censors reject the entire film as "obscene." Can you believe this?

We decided that we couldn't possibly continue this way. I'm a total enemy of censorship in *all* of its forms. Period. Without any reservations. To me this process was absolutely obnoxious—"obnoxious" isn't strong enough. I was betraying something, compromising myself by submitting the films to the censors. We had some discussions with a civil liberties lawyer, and decided that we were going to start a private membership club. When you do that, you're not subject to censorship.

Did your troubles with New York State censorship end completely once you'd become a club?

Completely, though there was one stipulation. There's pre-censorship and post-censorship. We eliminated pre-censorship completely by becoming a film society. However, with post-censorship, the police can go into a place and say, "You *have shown* something that is obscene." Had I desired to show hard-core porno films at Cinema 16, I certainly would have had access to such films, but I think we would have been closed by the police. It was not possible to show hard-core films to a general public then, even in a club atmosphere. In any case, I had no desire to do that, not because I'm against hard-core porno—it just wasn't what I was after.

Anyway, if you're a club, you're not subject to blizzards, because you collect the membership fees in advance for an entire year. If the member doesn't come, for whatever reason, you've still been paid. Of course, it also meant that we could not sell individual tickets, and we had programs where we had to turn *hundreds* of people away. But you could join the night of the performance, if you paid for the entire year. The fees were very low, $10 a year for 16 performances.

I started showing films in 1947 and six months later we were a membership film society and remained that way until the very end, in 1963. We were nonprofit and tax-exempt,

but the only way we could get the tax exemptions was because the government checked us out to see that we were on the up and up, that we were not putting a profit into our pockets. What we were allowed to do, of course, is pay salaries. We never had any problems about profit because the amount of money that came in simply paid the cost of the operation, plus very reasonable salaries. In the beginning we had nothing, but ultimately, when it got to be good, Marcia and I together got up to maybe $15,000 a year.

Projectionists were another interesting problem. The union came after us immediately. They said, "This should be unionized," and I was in favor, I've always been in favor, of unions. I said OK, despite the fact that they insisted on *two* high-priced union projectionists per show. But it was a unionized operation from the very first performance to the very last. I'm proud of this.

Marcia was in charge of taking in memberships; a friend of ours would sell film books at the theater. We hired ushers, who got paid $2 an hour, or whatever it was in those days. Very little. So you see it was a very minimal operation. It was always determined by the yearly budget: in some years we had fewer members than in others, though many of the operating expenses remained the same. So we would take a lower salary that year.

How long were you in the Provincetown Playhouse?

Very briefly. We grew too fast. Why have 16 nights for 200 or 400 people each? It wasn't economical. First, we moved to a place called the Central Needle Trades Auditorium, a huge place: 1600 seats, very modern, in a local school here. It had a nice projection set-up with a booth and big screen, real nice seats, murals on the wall from WPA days . . . We had *two* performances of each program there, on one evening; that meant 3,200 people for each evening.

You filled it?

Yes! And that wasn't all because then we realized there might be people who didn't want to come to the Central Needle Trades Auditorium, but who might come to a real movie house. Of course we couldn't rent a theater during normal show times, but we made a deal with several theaters—the Beekman, for instance, and the Paris—first-run art theaters in Manhattan. We booked the Murray Hill Theater and the Paris for 11 o'clock on Sunday mornings; at 1:00 o'clock their regular show started. We paid a fee to the owners, and we showed the same Cinema 16 program there that we showed in the Central Needle Trades Auditorium. Those theaters had 500 seats each, on the average. Actually, the very first showing of the Cinema 16 Film Society took place at the Fifth Avenue Playhouse, also an art theater; the film was the première of Hans Richter's *Dreams That Money Can Buy*.

Did you have a sense of the sorts of people who came to the screenings?

We did questionnaires, things like that. There were a lot of artists and intellectuals, and would-be intellectuals and would-be artists. The gamut ranged from the quite sophisticated, the movers and shakers on the cultural scene, to school teachers and secretaries, people who wanted to widen their horizons. I'm continuously surprised by the well-known people who say to me, "Ah, Cinema 16, how wonderful it was, where has it gone," and this and that. I have thought that it would be an interesting research project sometime to go through the lists name by name and try to find out who these people are now. All the Beats came. Ginsberg and the rest. All the film people came: people who were teaching film, who were making films. And, on the other hand, there were many liberal bourgeois people. It was the only place to go to see the films.

Could you apply for state or federal grants?

There was a totally different situation in those days in respect to funding. There was not any aid. There were no private foundations interested in this sort of activity. And what really amazes me, in retrospect, is that

The Needle Trades Auditorium

this project ran for 16 years without *any* outside support. That means it depended *100%* on membership fees. I didn't have a rich father who could give us money when we had a deficit. Nor did we attempt to raise funds from within Cinema 16. It's conceivable, obviously, that there were people there who had money, but we made no attempt to find out.

At what point did it become a full-time involvement for you?

Originally it was going to be a part-time thing, but after the Provincetown Playhouse success, it was obvious to us that this should be full-time.

I looked at thousands of films to select the programs. I began to go through the catalogues of whatever distribution firms existed, and there were many. It wasn't as though I had to go into barren territory. I had more films than I could handle. But not avant-garde films. That field had to be developed. Peterson would tell me he knew so and so who had made a little film, and I'd get in touch with him. Or people, having heard of Cinema 16 in New York, would write and tell me about their films. Tens, hundreds began to drift in. Any film submitted to us was looked at. I had very good help with this—Jack Goelman, who worked with me.

I made folders for every film I saw, regardless of its length. While I was watching each film, I took notes, and the notes went into a folder. As of now, at age 62, I have between 20,000 and 30,000 folders.

An entire year's program—16 different events—would be put together in advance. It might consist of 200 films or 50 films, depending on length.

Did you have particular things in mind when you were deciding on programs, or did you just program the films that knocked you out?

I think the latter would be an honest way of putting it. I wanted films that in some way would disturb you, would add to your knowledge and make you change. I think the whole notion of change was very basic to Cinema 16. I've always been very involved with the idea of creating a world which is different from the one in which we are living; I'm very dissatisfied with *this* world. I have always considered myself to be a radical socialist, and

James Broughton's MOTHER'S DAY

I have always had this curious notion that even a film on cosmology or a psychological study or an avant-garde work can serve a positive function in improving the world, because it takes us away from where we are now and opens us up to new possibilities.

There was inevitably a strong subjective factor in all these decisions. Essentially you choose in terms of who you are, and who you are is, in turn, the end product of a very long prior development, including your environment, all the influences that have worked on you: your parents, your children, your school, your books, even your genetic constitution. My experience with Hitler was important to me. All these things enter into the picture, obviously.

There were definitely avant-garde films or independent films that I did not choose. I felt they weren't good enough to be shown. On the other hand—this is an important point—there was never any attention paid to what might be called Box Office. I think Box Office is poison. Many times in my life I've had the possibility of starting a commercial theater, but I never wanted to do it because I *knew* that if I did, I would become the prisoner of what the box-office requirements were. That was another wonderful thing about having a membership set-up. I was able to present programs which I knew in advance would antagonize most of the audience. But that was OK; there were other programs they would like. In any case, people learned that when they went to Cinema 16, they had to expect to be displeased sometimes.

If you showed a program that offended people one week, was attendance down the next week?

No. When people were offended by a pro-

gram, there was usually a very small percentage who would be extremely upset. They would write us letters, or call us up and say, "How dare you show this piece of shit!" If they said, "Give us our money back," we were delighted to do so. We wanted to get rid of them. We weren't going to have them tell us what to show. I showed one of the worst (i.e., most powerful) Nazi propaganda films ever made, a film that to this day cannot be shown anywhere: *The Eternal Jew*. I imported that from the Dutch Film Museum. Jan De Vaal, the director of the Museum, and I made a special arrangement. The film was stopped at the border here. They wouldn't have let it in, except that Siegfried Kracauer, himself a Jewish refugee from Germany, wrote a letter to the customs people and explained to them that I was going to have a very educational evening for which he was going to write program notes (which he did, by the way). It was allowed into the country for one showing only. When I showed that film, there were many Jews who felt that I had done the worst possible thing; I'd shown a film which specifically said all Jews were as evil as rats.

In some instances I chose films with sex in them. In those days that itself was more than some people could abide. Kenneth Anger's *Fireworks*? It was a scandal in those days to show a film with a gay theme. The censors didn't allow it. And even though we had a private club, there were people who felt gay issues should not be talked about. I felt, why not? There are people who are like that. And I would show the films more than once. I'm a strong believer in showing essentially anything that has human and aesthetic validity. Maybe it's obnoxious to some, but there's a fighting element in me which rebels against authority and constraint. That has been true throughout my life, and it came out in my choice of films. People would come to me and say, "You know those films you showed yesterday with the red, blue and green dots? They gave me a headache." I'd ask, "What did you take?" They'd say, "You *really* gave me a headache!" so I'd say "If you get too many headaches, maybe you shouldn't come."

Did film-makers appear with the films?

Rarely. We did not have that tradition in those days. At every showing we did have four pages of single-spaced program notes which we produced ourselves. Even now there are not many places with program notes. I believe in program notes. I think they have to be done very carefully; you have to be very objective. You shouldn't try to impose something on the audience by having Amos Vogel or somebody say "This film is marvelous!" I don't think that pays. But on the other hand, a lot of interesting information can appear in program notes. But, no, we did not have film-makers come in person. It wasn't that they came to me and I refused to let them appear; the film-makers weren't interested in coming. Film-makers did attend our Creative Film Foundation events. But even then they didn't really talk. They were available for questions, but that wasn't an important part of the proceedings. In retrospect I think it would have been better had we also had such programs. We did have well-known critics or film scholars from time to time, people like Parker Tyler.

It must have been very exciting to explore all those films and learn what people would like and how they would respond. Are there moments in the first year or so of your operation that stand out?

It *was* exciting. It was wonderful. And it was a continuing process of feedback. Sometimes, of course, what stands out are not the high spots, but the difficulties. We had huge difficulties with the Hans Richter film, because the distributor was a very crass businessman. I learned so much about the film business from him. One day we had the film, the next day we didn't. But we came out OK in the end. We showed the film, and Richter and I became very good friends. He was a great guy. I loved him.

The whole business with the avant-garde was very exciting. When I saw Peterson's films and Broughton's at the very beginning of Cinema 16, I was very excited. I can't convey to you how I felt. They were just marvelous for me. *Why* is an interesting question, because as it turned out, my enthusiasm was shared by only a small proportion of the audience. The majority were either against it, or they were totally indifferent to it. They couldn't see what I saw.

Do you have a sense of why that is?

A very simplistic way of putting it would be to say that it's by far the most difficult thing

for people to take in or absorb or appreciate, because essentially it deals with a new way of seeing. There's something very comforting about dealing only with the conventional, and, of course, something extremely conservative, if not reactionary. Hollywood and television are constantly giving us things that we've already seen, both in terms of content and in terms of style. The most interesting and important avant-garde films are precisely those films that have never been done before —in style, in content, in form—and therefore are extremely difficult for most people to accept. I prefer to be upset, and one of the criteria I use when I look at films and write my notes is unpredictability. If I can say that I don't know where a film is going or how it's going to get there—that's one of the greatest assets. I had hoped that by showing these films at Cinema 16 and by making audiences more and more familiar with them, I would develop more tolerance and a better understanding of them. I'm sure I succeeded, but only within certain limits. Always there was the complaint, especially with abstract films, "I got a headache from looking at it." They said it then, they say it now. It's obviously an ideological headache.

The main reason why I personally liked these films has to do with what I'd call "visual sensibility." I believe people involved with culture, and maybe everybody, has some primary sensibility, a verbal or literary sensibility, or a visual one. I was so entranced with visual modern art—paintings, photography, anything visual—that it carried over, of course, in film. When I see a Peterson or a Noren or an Anger film, I am transfixed; I get acute sensual, sensuous pleasure from it, a pleasure I want others to feel as well. That's why I showed those films.

We had at Cinema 16—and this was a direct result of what I wanted Cinema 16 to be—two different audiences, at least two. We had an audience that preferred documentary and nonfiction, social and political films, realistic films; and we had an audience that preferred avant-garde and experimental films. There were instances where the documentary group would say to me, "What the hell are you showing these avant-garde films for! Obviously they're frauds." "Fraud" was an important word, like "It gives me a headache!" On the other hand, the avant-gardists were saying, "What the hell are you showing these documentary films for? They're hackneyed; realism doesn't exist . . ." I was in the middle. For me the films all had a common denominator: they created a disturbance in the status quo.

I'm often surprised by the way in which people who are savvy about contemporary art, poetry, and music are still not able to accept parallel developments in film. In this sense there seems to be a gap between film and the other arts.

Well, I'll give you one reason. When you look at a very advanced kind of modernist painting, you can decide whether you want to look for one minute or for half an hour, or just turn away. With film you're a captive. The abstract or surrealist film that someone has made cannot be conveyed to you in an instant. An instant is as much time as some people look at modern art, even when they're *interested.* May I'm exaggerating: maybe it's half a minute or two minutes. If you've got a film that goes on for 15, 30, 50 minutes . . . or an hour and a half, there's a kind of domination of the film-maker over the audience. Secondly, in other art forms—literature and painting for example—not only has modernist work been known and accepted for a long time, but in fact modernism has been dominant; we call it *serious* literature or *serious* art. This is not true of film; in film you have the total domination of Hollywood, and Hollywood was not, is not, in the twentieth century. But don't think for a moment that because the majority of members said in our polls that they didn't want to see avant-garde films, that I stopped showing them. I used the polls just to get a feeling of where people were.

The time element is important, and people are imprisoned in darkness. But still it seems strange to me. I've routinely used The Sound and the Fury *in my American literature classes, and students struggle with it, but there's never any feeling that I'm doing something terrible by assigning it. Most students admire the book. But if I show* Serene Velocity *(and it's a class period, so it's clear that the film can't possibly be longer than another 30 minutes or so), they usually react as though I've purposely tortured them. Of course, in* The Sound and the Fury *there is a narrative. Reading the novel is largely involved with finding the*

conventional narrative beneath the complex form and language . . .

And that gets you involved. But you can't do that with so many avant-garde films.

Now, I want to make another point. I have come to the conclusion in my own life that we are not uniformly open to new trends in all media. It varies from person to person. Let me be quite personal about this: I love avant-garde film, but I have definite difficulties with very advanced modern music. Why? There are differences between human beings and inconsistencies within us, and that's good too. I think most human beings do not represent a particular viewpoint across all media. There may be such people; if so, they are closer to a true avant-garde. But there aren't many of them. I think some of the resistance to avant-garde films is—I hate to use the word—genetic. I'm absolutely convinced that if you gave me 100 undergraduates for two years, two courses per year, I could develop in half of them a real appreciation for what's being done in those films. But only in half.

A related question. I've found in programming my own series, that when I program a film, *I almost always get a fairly sizable audience, but when I program a film* and film-maker, *I get a much smaller group. In my head, having the film-maker present is an advantage, but not to most people.*

Maybe they've had experiences with some of the film-makers as speakers. You know, they aren't always that wonderful. For you and me they add something (not always!), but for a more general audience, I'm not too sure. There's only one way in which a more general audience loves the film-makers, and that is the way we used to do it, and the way it's still being done at the New York Film Festival. If at the end of a film which has been well received, the film-maker is there to receive the applause, a wonderful rapport takes place between the audience and the film-maker. But, if that continues into a discussion with the film-maker, only a certain proportion of the audience will stay, and the questions that come from the audience, I'm sorry to say, are not terribly good. As a result, the film-maker doesn't open up sufficiently, either. But there have been exceptions: very fruitful interchanges, even with general audiences.

I don't remember seeing any other film programmer present scientific films, though it seems like a very good idea. Even now, I'm not sure I'd know how to locate quality scientific films.

I had to do an awful lot of spade work to find my sources. There were films in distribution, and I finally got to them. There was an outfit called Psychological Cinema Register which had a very large collection of films used primarily by medical people, psychologists, scientists. It was very unusual for them to get a request from somebody on the outside. They didn't even know how to deal with it; suddenly they had to establish some kind of policy. There was often a problem with sex. Should Cinema 16 be allowed to show a bunch of rhesus monkeys fucking?

I always went by what interested me and what involved me, feeling that there had to be others who'd be interested. I even programmed films that were only interesting for their content—films that weren't well edited, well photographed, but were absolutely marvelous in terms of what they showed. One film—I'll never forget it—was called *Neurosis and Alcohol.* It was about rats that were made drunk, and then presented with extremely frustrating situations. It was hilarious, and extremely revealing and informative about the connection between neurosis and alcohol. On the other hand, we had a film called *Monkey into Man* by Stuart Legg, who came out of the British documentary movement, a scientific (and poetic!) film about evolution, beautifully photographed and edited.

Another good example involved the work of Roman Vishniak, a famous scientist, a famous photographer. The International Center for Photography in New York had an exhibition of his photography, which ranges from definitive books on Polish News to microcinematography—some of the most marvelous I've ever seen. He must be in his eighties now. I began to find out about him, and I went to see him, and spent wonderful afternoons with him, preparing for the screening. All he had was footage; he did not have finished films, and we had to add the sound tracks. He spoke them on tape. I think that presenting his work to the public is one of the best things I've ever done. To me, it was the most natural thing in the world to show scientific films.

The only place I can think of where there

seems to be a consciousness of scientific film as film *is among avant-garde film-makers. J. J. Murphy has a film called* Science Fiction *where he took an old science film and reedited sections of it into a comedy; Hollis Frampton's* Mindfall *uses early scientific footage of seizures. Other than that, it's almost as though that whole world of film doesn't exist for film critics or teachers.*

One of the quotes that had a tremendous influence on me, maybe the basic one, is, in English (I first heard it in German): "Nothing human is alien to me." Marx used it—it came from a Greek philosopher, I believe. It has allowed me to be tolerant of everything "because it's human." In relation to Cinema 16 it meant there was no such thing as a film that, because of its genre, let's say, would not be of interest to me. I remember Andy Sarris saying that animation is not film, and explaining why (and I've heard others say it, too). I just think that's harebrained. I've seen some very great works of cinema art in the animated film. The same with scientific film. A few months ago I saw a film on TV, one of the Nova series I think, about spiders. I've never seen anything more fascinating, or more visual. How can you possibly ignore such work? I'm delighted that it's there, and I want to show it. And it's always worked very well, in terms of audiences.

Those sorts of films are on TV a lot, but it's a shame not to see them on a big screen.

That's right. That spider film would be wonderful in a first-run theater.

Did Cinema 16 do anything with modified forms of film—3D or film installation?

Very little. We showed *The Door in the Garden* based on an H. G. Wells story—a film with variable-size screen images. Had there been a system that would have allowed me to show 3D in 16mm, I would have definitely wanted to do it. I'm extremely interested. I bought a 3D still camera recently and I go to the Museum of Holography regularly—what a great (and mysterious!) place.

Cinema 16 ended before performance art and happenings. They came in during the sixties. I do remember a funny exception. When we premiered Willard Maas's *Narcissus* (we premiered all of his films), he arrived on the evening of the premiere and said, "Where's the projection room?" I said, "Over there, why?" He says, "I gotta do something." He had brought different colored cels with him which he put in front of the lens at certain points so that the film was tinted. Very amateurish, but at the same time very beautifully done. I saw wonderful light shows in the sixties, outside of Cinema 16 I mean, very inventive—superior in some ways to Laurie Anderson's *U.S.A.* She's terribly important, as far

THE LAST DAY OF SUMMER: *Polish avant-garde film by Tadeusz Konwicki*

as I can see, but those light shows were remarkable.

At the time when Cinema 16 was developing, were you travelling in Europe a lot?

Not at the beginning. Later on I travelled to film festivals. Or, I would go to Paris and London to meet film-makers, producers, distributors. As time went by, I brought in more and more films from abroad. I remember Agnes Varda asking me if I wanted to distribute *Opera Mouffe,* one of her shorts. In those days she hadn't made features yet. I dealt with Franju in Paris, and got *Blood of the Beasts.* I dealt with Argus Films, which was a fascinating commercial outfit that made hundreds of shorts and also features, many of great interest.

Oh, let me tell you a story. There were supposed to be some fabulous student films being made in Poland, at this famous film school. People told me about them, or maybe I had read something somewhere. I sat down and wrote a letter to the director of the school, with whom I subsequently became good friends, asking if we could get these films here, and sure enough we got them. (I had to learn about the "diplomatic pouch," and about the censorship involved when you import films.) And what were these films? They were by someone unknown, a student—Roman Polanski! The very first things he did in 35mm: *Two Men and a Wardrobe, The Fat and the Thin,* five or six titles. Also, I was in correspondence with Makavejev when he was making little student films in Yugoslavia, but I could never get them out. I had all kinds of contacts with Japan, too—Oshima when he first started. So Cinema 16 was an international enterprise. In retrospect I sometimes wonder what would have happened if we had had the editorial and press support Karen Cooper has now at Film Forum. In those days the *New York Times* not only had no policy of reviewing independent films, they had a critic who was an active, hostile opponent of the independent cinema: Bosley Crowther, a very powerful and ignorant man. I'd invite him to every show, but he wouldn't come. Even without that kind of support we had 7,000 members. Imagine what could have happened if we'd had it!

Reviews

NEVER CRY WOLF

Director: Carroll Ballard. Screenplay: Curtis Hanson and Sam Hamm and Richard Kletter, based on the book by Farley Mowat. Producers: Lewis Allen, Jack Couffer, Joseph Strick. Photography: Hiro Narita. Music: Mark Isham. Buena Vista Distributing Co.

Carroll Ballard's *Never Cry Wolf* goes his earlier film, *The Black Stallion,* one better. Again Ballard's obsession with pure images of animal energy in wilderness settings produces scenes of unforgettable physical beauty and adventure excitement. But *Never Cry Wolf* plots a tougher, less sentimental encounter than *The Black Stallion:* not boy meets horse, but man meets *canis lupus.* As a result, *Never Cry Wolf* is less charming, but far more powerful.

In part, the new power derives from Ballard's source, the environmental classic of the same title by Farley Mowat, one of the most widely read nature writers in the world today. In *Never Cry Wolf,* first published in 1962, Mowat detailed his assignment as a young biologist sent to the Arctic by the Canadian government to prove that wolves were decimating caribou herds. Instead, Mowat found his "target" wolves immensely likeable, and far from the northern "jaws" of popular caricature. *Never Cry Wolf* was thus the first of many studies rehabilitating the wolf and, at times, stimulating repeal of anti-predator legislation and classification of wolves as endangered species.

Ballard follows Mowat's book quite faithfully, but makes two key changes, one weak, the other magnificent. First, Ballard alters the frame, the episodes before and after the encounter with the wolves, to make an oversensational, misanthropic statement about the world of man. On the other hand, Ballard considerably deepens the story of *one* man, the biologist, here renamed Tyler and superbly played by Charles Martin Smith. Tyler doesn't

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just encounter wolves; he encounters the primitive in his self, in nature, in the *cosmos.* It is a tribute to Ballard's cinematography that such a word is not too big to describe the mood *Never Cry Wolf* evokes. In the barren Yukon of lunar tundra and outcrop rock where *Never Cry Wolf* was shot, Ballard has found the perfect vehicle to use his stark, vivid style for decidedly spiritual ends.

Before *The Black Stallion,* Ballard had made other movies centered around animals—the Academy Award documentary nominee *Harvest* and *Pigs* in 1967; and *The Perils of Priscilla* (a cat) and *Rodeo,* a documentary on a bull rider, in 1969. But *Never Cry Wolf* is not an animal movie or a straight factual record of a human dealing with animals. As Ballard said in an interview, "The film is not about wolves, but about change inside a man."

Nevertheless, *Never Cry Wolf* is an excellent study of the species, rivaling *Death of a Legend,* the Canadian National Film Board documentary that first took on the big bad wolf stereotype on screen. As in the documentary, Ballard's wolves come across without anthropomorphizing sentimentality; they are tough, rugged, and unapologetically carnivore. "The worst thing for wolves," Ballard says, "is for people to regard them as cute, or as suitable for pets." In this regard, *Never Cry Wolf* belies its Disney label.

On the other hand, true to Mowat's findings, Ballard shows wolves as a gregarious species, loyal mates for life, playful with their young and clan. Rather than destroying caribou herds, they are seen as harmless to local ecology, surviving mostly on mice, which they catch by trapping above ground and instantaneously pouncing on with adept leaps. The lightest moment in the film occurs when Tyler —like Mowat, attempting to prove a big mammal can survive on a diet of rodents—adopts the wolf menu. This clear vision of the human carnivore, however, is somewhat spoiled by shots of surviving mice scurrying away in cutesy-comic terror.

It was not easy to film the wolf segments, since Ballard had to rely on tame animals raised in captivity. According to Mowat, who worked as a consultant for the film, these wolves certainly look genuine, and in any case it would be impossible to shoot the movie with wild wolves, who would run away from any human presence. But the tame wolves were not the perfect answer. Despite the many animal trainers on location, the wolves took their own sweet time—at play, in puppy tomfoolery, or simply in howling, which would not be done on cue and which therefore added considerably to the production schedule. A classic scene in Mowat's account involves a comic competition between him and the lead male, or Alpha wolf, in staking out territory in traditional canine "fireplug" fashion. The star wolf, Polchak, had to be encouraged to raise his leg at the right time for several weeks, until he finally did the trick fifty times in one hour.

The violent scenes in the movie involved further problems. Appropriately, Ballard could not use the wolves for a fantasy chase sequence early in the film, where Tyler dreams the animals are savagely attacking him. "There was no way to get wolves to do that," Ballard says, and police dogs had to be hired. The wolves did respond to the presence of caribou, however, to create a spectacular climactic sequence—proving, as Mowat asserted, they can only catch the sick members of the herds.

But then getting the caribou to cooperate was a tricky process. Ballard had to rely on semi-domestic herds left to graze on high pasture by the Eskimos who claim to "own" them and who in fact harvest their antlers every few years for sale to Korean businessmen as aphrodisiacs. After negotiating with the Eskimos and holding off the Koreans, Ballard had to locate and film the caribou, no easy matter. "The point is that you can't just sneak up on caribou," Ballard says. "They make their living *not* being sneaked up on." Once cornered, the herd moved "like an amoeba," Ballard says, and at one point almost ran off a cliff like lemmings.

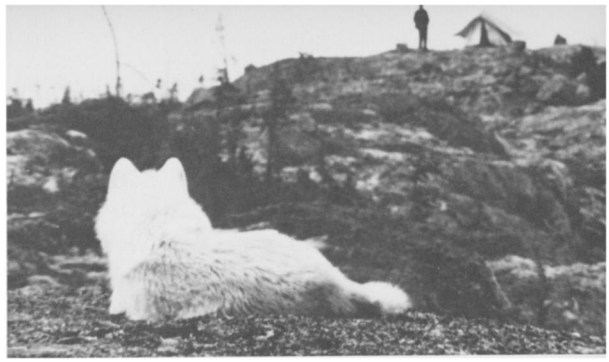
Fortunately the human actors involved in *Never Cry Wolf* were dedicated and committed—Charles Martin Smith, formerly featured in *American Grafitti,* and two Inuit Eskimos who had never acted before. Smith is excellent in the voice-over narration, most of which he wrote himself, and in filling the many silences in the movie with facial expression registering his growing regard for the wolves. His portrayal of Tyler's growth from bumbling greenhorn to wilderness protector

apparently provoked a deep identification with the role: he now calls himself Farley Smith, and the author, with whom Smith established a close personal friendship while on location, now calls himself Charles Martin Mowat.

Smith also established a close rapport with the Eskimo playing Ootek, a kind of spiritual godfather who adopts Tyler and instructs him in the ways of the North. The "actor" is Zachary Ittimangnaq, and if he reminds viewers of *Little Big Man*'s Chief Dan George or the Soviet Wild Man, Dersu Uzala, it is probably because he is their real-life incarnation. According to Ballard, Ootek is a "professional Eskimo," who has preserved the ancient lifestyle of the Inuit, and, until his acting role, lived entirely off the land. Ittimangnaq plays Ootek with silent authority, acting—if it is acting—with gesture and expression to initiate Tyler into the mysteries of a primeval world.

With both Ittimangnaq and the other Eskimo amateur, Samson Jorah, Ballard did not write a script, but jotted down on cardboard the general nature of a scene, outlined what he wanted them to discuss, and then began shooting. For a scene in which both Smith and Jorah are observing wolves and discussing why Eskimos hunt them, Ballard wrote down "family—money—snowmobiles." Jorah talks of these as motives for killing wolves, but claims that he would never shoot the wolves that Tyler is studying. Then, with a wide-toothed smile, Jorah adds improvisationally, "But I'd like to." The line is economical, chilling, and entirely native American.

Ittimangnaq's wife in real life plays herself in the movie, and adds a similar key line when the two Eskimo males relate to Tyler the myth of Amorak, the wolf spirit. According to the myth, the God of the Sky once saw that human hunters were killing too many of the "big fat caribou." So he called Amorak, the spirit of the wolf, and told him to instruct his children to hunt the sick animals only; accordingly, the wolves restricted their hunting and the herds recovered. According to Ootek, Amorak is no dormant spirit but seizes the heart of many who come to the Arctic to make them love the wolf. Then his wife adds to Tyler, "Maybe he has eaten your heart too." The scene is, of course, a cliché: around an archetypal campfire, the acolyte is taught the tribe's



NEVER CRY WOLF

sacred truths. But the woman's grizzled, weather-beaten face—and a smile halfway between an elf's and one of the weird sisters'—renews the cliché and gives the scene authenticity and power.

The chief actors in *Never Cry Wolf* are space and silence. Drawing on their power, Ballard extends the style he applied to the Sardinian scenes in the first half of *The Black Stallion,* dealing now with an even more savage landscape and more wordless communication between man and animal. According to Ballard, there is "a magic power in a movie frame to concentrate attention and focus the mind," and in *Never Cry Wolf* he tries to use that limiting but intensifying power to the utmost. Here, with the aid of director of photography Hiro Narita, Ballard has attempted to create a kind of pure style, with so much footage of snow, water, rock and sky that our attention is reduced, concentrated down to *elemental* things, the raw material of life on earth. The visual style is complemented by the verbal: with thin surface action, minimal dialogue, and a poetically understated voice-over narration, Ballard has gone a long way to making a silent talkie.

Ballard wants to use this silence to make his viewers hear again. In his view, the sounds which clutter our lives in cities—sirens, construction booms, air conditioners—have created "a world inside our head, an abstract world, and most of our existence is lived inside that abstraction." The loving absorption of his cinematography in stark, vivid natural imagery and of his sound track in silence testifies to his belief that movies should somehow empty an audience of its crowded mindset. His style in *Never Cry Wolf,* in short, attempts to mirror the cleansing process his hero Tyler undergoes on his Yukon quest.

One scene in particular confirms Ballard's

skill with silence. After some initial difficulties acclimatizing, Tyler walks across a frozen lake in midspring, gun in hand—still seeking wolves in accordance with his government's aggressive, hostile outlook. As he tramps across the snow, the sound track is bare, but for the crunch of his shoes and a sudden curious echoing noise. Tyler stops and listens with ears perked. Ballard cuts to a rabbit on a bank by the lake, then cuts back to Tyler taking another step; again he hears the low echo, and again Ballard cuts to the hare. Then, with sudden explosive roar, Tyler falls through the ice, which had been weakening so ominously under him. Once under—after getting his backpack and rifle off—he can't find the hole he fell through, and struggles desperately for a way up. Ballard again cuts to the rabbit eyeing it all dumbly. The only human sound in the scene—a symbolic immersion and baptism into a beautiful but merciless world—is literally a last gasp.

Unfortunately, *Never Cry Wolf* does not always retain this high tone. Before the immersion scene, for example, Tyler is simply too unprepared. His naive preconceptions and absurdly inappropriate equipment are good for a few laughs, and help set the stage for the rite-de-passage he undergoes, but they are narratively untrue to Mowat and factually implausible. No one survives in the Arctic on naiveté; the region can kill casually even the well prepared without much notice, as the later lake sequence demonstrates. Ballard did not have to stress Tyler's inexperience to present the Arctic as an entirely new one.

As in *The Black Stallion,* Ballard is as weak on civilization as he is strong on nature. The end of *Never Cry Wolf,* for example, resorts to simplifications to dramatize the theme of technology versus the wilderness. Ballard sensationalizes the entry of development forces into the Arctic, transforming a drunken bush pilot from the beginning of the movie to an aggressive real estate developer and advance guard for civilization at the end. This does condense a great deal of history into a small space, but seems forced and propagandistic. The denouement involving the Eskimos is also cloudy, with Mike, the character played by Jorah, *apparently* surrendering to the civilizing forces, but without really having had time or place to do so.

These are, however, small criticisms. *Never Cry Wolf* was a difficult movie to make, taking twice as long and costing twice as much as expected; in addition to wolves and caribou, weather rarely cooperated with Ballard's plans. But he has matched the Arctic with both epic patience and epic vision. It is a minor loss that he spoils the grandeur of his effort with slapdash hokum about man's world. But perhaps this is simply the price we must pay for the genius of the rest.

—TOM O'BRIEN

DANIEL

Director: Sidney Lumet. Script: E. l. Doctorow, from his own novel. Producer: Burtt Harris. Photography: Andrzej Bartkowiak. Paramount.

Daniel, to my mind the most powerful film of 1983, has received some of the year's most scornful reviews. Most of these responses have been predictable; they have also been largely irrelevant. Directed by Sidney Lumet and adapted by E. L. Doctorow from his own novel, the film has been harshly criticized for failing to tell the whole truth about Julius and Ethel Rosenberg (which it makes no pretense of doing). Many of the reviews have a curiously smug and scolding tone. *Daniel* opens at a moment when the Reagan administration has been mounting an intensive, largely successful campaign to revive the anti-Communist paranaoia that took hold in the fifties. A film that recalls the dangers of that hysteria is definitely going against the grain. Although they might try to deny it, mainstream movie critics have almost always reflected rather than defied the prevailing political mood in the country, and this film clearly makes them uncomfortable. Still, it is depressing to see them working themselves into a self-righteous lather as they accuse the film of being—God help us—soft on Communism and naive about the insidiousness of the Soviet menace. We have come full circle; the Cold War madness of the fifties is resurgent in the eighties, and that is one reason why this film is such a courageous and pertinent plea for sanity.

Although the critics have attacked the film for simplifying the political issues of the period, it is really the critics who have simplified the political attitudes of the film. In its view of the Isaacsons' radicalism, *Daniel* is far

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DANIEL: *The burial of Susan*

more intelligent and complex than some reviews have suggested. Paul Isaacson (Mandy Patinkin) is presented as the embodiment of the doctrinaire, party line Communists of the thirties—a humorless, single-minded bore. No matter where he is, he seizes the opportunity to lecture his family and friends about the evils of capitalism and the brotherhood of man in the coming socialist utopia. He even harangues his young son about the dire political implications of a baseball game and a box of Wheaties.

Paul loves his children, but he cannot relate to them without falling back on rhetoric and cant. In this regard he comes off badly in comparison to his wife Rochelle (Lindsay Crouse). Rochelle shares Paul's radical beliefs but does not allow them to consume her life. When she and Paul debate taking young Daniel to the Peekskill concert, Rochelle is concerned about her son's safety whereas Paul's only concern is that the boy be exposed to "the great people's singer," Paul Robeson. Their reactions when their children visit them in prison are vividly contrasted: Rochelle's simplicity and maternal warmth show up Paul's manic ranting; even in this most highly charged of encounters, he cannot stop hectoring the children about the evils of the capitalist press. It is telling that Paul, the macho people's spokesman, faints in terror at the sight of the electric chair, while Rochelle faces death defiantly. In the film's acerbic view, Paul is the prototypical example of the radical firebrand who is something of a fraud, while Rochelle, less obsessively "committed," is also more loving, more deeply courageous, and ultimately more heroic.

Like Doctorow's novel, the film never comes to a conclusion about the guilt or innocence of the Isaacsons on the charge of espionage. It does suggest, however, that whatever they did, they were motivated by a misplaced sense of political idealism rather than by any sense of malice. In this respect at least, the film is clearly on their side, and it angrily protests the injustice of their executions. Even those who have argued that the Rosenbergs *were* involved in an atomic spy ring—like Ronald Radosh and Joyce Milton in their new book on the case—have agreed that the death sentence was grotesquely disproportionate to the crime, a terrifying sign of the rabid hysteria of the era. Radosh and Milton have also documented the shocking misconduct in the government's handling of the case, so that even if one comes away convinced of the Rosenbergs' guilt, there is little solace to be drawn

from the actions of the FBI and the Justice Department. Lumet addressed this point in a recent interview, when he admitted that he had never come to his own conclusion about the Rosenbergs' guilt or innocence. "In a peculiar way, I think that's not very important," he said. "Whatever they did, our government did worse."

That is the kind of statement that will outrage anti-Communist zealots, but it is easy to sympathize with Lumet's point of view. Agree for the moment that the Rosenbergs were guilty of giving atomic secrets to the Russians. No one has claimed that they did it for money; in this they can be clearly contrasted to another famous spy, Christopher Boyce. They were genuinely concerned about American atomic hegemony, fearful of a war against Russia, sincere—if tragically misguided—in their enduring commitment to Communist ideals. Their naiveté may be upsetting, but the actions of the US government were far more upsetting: in prosecuting the case on a legally dubious conspiracy charge, the government capitalized on mass hysteria in place of carefully documented evidence and exacted a punishment that it knew to be outrageously unfair and inhuman, merely in order to demonstrate the gravity of the Cold War. Whether or not the Rosenbergs were guilty as charged, the conduct of the government in the case raises profoundly disturbing questions about the abuses of power by the very agencies meant to protect the lives of this country's citizens.

Daniel addresses these questions in an indirect way; it is not designed as a political manifesto, but as a film about family and the crime of the annihilation of family. It deserves to be considered alongside such films as *The Grapes of Wrath, On the Waterfront, The Godfather*—pointed social documents that also happen to be primal family dramas. To imagine the Cold War in terms of the destruction of one family crystallizes the horror and obscenity of the era.

The film is composed of the most elemental scenes of familial disruption: the FBI agents tearing apart the Isaacson apartment, violating all their most personal possessions; Rochelle embracing her son as she leaves home for the last time; the children fleeing the Bronx shelter where they have been sent and making their way across an unfamiliar urban landscape to their deserted home; the children's visit to their parents on Death Row. The film's central, piercing thesis is that family is at the very heart of all society—the most basic social unit on which all larger organizations rest. If a government can destroy a family in the name of a political symbol, then it is really making a travesty of its own crusade, betraying all the values that link civilized people.

What makes the film especially penetrating is that it accuses many other people besides the government authorities of cruelty to the family. In the searing scene in which the young children are passed over the heads of the crowd at a pro-Isaacson rally, Lumet offers his most forceful criticism of the radical movement. The supporters of the Isaacsons are interested in *using* the children as no more than abstract symbols of injustice; they are disturbingly insensitive to the loneliness and terror of the children themselves.

Another caustic sequence dramatizes the reluctance of the children's aunt (Julie Bovasso) to take them into her home; she fears that she will be tainted by any association with the Isaacsons. Her disloyalty is another of the crimes that the film laments. But it does not absolve Paul and Rochelle of complicity either. Although the extent of their involvement in espionage is never definitively established, there is a suggestion that they choose to martyr themselves so as not to implicate anyone else; and in this they too may have been guilty of placing some kind of abstract political principle above the survival of their family.

The film's main purpose is to examine the impact of this tragedy on the Isaacsons' children; it asks whether there is any way of healing the wounds left by this rupture. In the late sixties, when the film begins, the Isaacsons' daughter Susan (Amanda Plummer) has tried to assuage her sense of loss by plunging into a variety of causes—first religion, then sexual liberation, then revolutionary politics. She searches desperately for a movement larger than herself in which her personal grief can be subsumed. Yet all of her efforts are futile; she ultimately suffers a breakdown, attempts suicide and later dies. Her lonely, makeshift funeral is contrasted to the huge, stately procession of mourners that honored her parents at their funeral 15 years earlier. And the contrast makes a scathing comment on our differ-

ing treatment of public martyrs and anonymous victims. Susan's fate is really the greatest indictment of her parents' persecutors. The poison they engendered cannot possibly be eliminated in just one generation.

Daniel (Timothy Hutton) has been scalded as well, though he is hardier than Susan and responds differently. He has forged a mask of cynicism to block out the agonizing memories. In his cold unyielding demeanor, he is reminiscent of the protagonist of an earlier Lumet movie, Sol Nazerman, the concentration camp survivor in *The Pawnbroker.* In response to unthinkable degradation, both characters have resolved to make themselves invulnerable to pain. Daniel mocks everyone and everything, and he seems incapable of any truly intimate relationship; he is emotionally dead. The opening of the film captures Daniel's abrasiveness in a dinner table scene with his sister Susan, his wife, and his adopted parents. He and Susan get into a vicious, divisive argument that immediately suggests the bleakest legacy of the Isaacson tragedy. Their family was ravaged from the outside, and now the survivors are finishing the job by destroying it from within. (It should be said that the Isaacson children are not meant to be directly analogous to Robert and Michael Meeropol, the children of the Rosenbergs, who both survived and wrote a book proclaiming their parents' innocence.)

As the film progresses, it dramatizes Daniel's emotional awakening, and with it the tentative restoration of his sense of family. As Daniel revisits his past and remembers the magnitude of the crime committed against his family, he also recognizes the importance of re-establishing those family ties if he is to survive. In the process he regains his humanity; his tears at Susan's grave release him from the grip of the past.

It is only when Daniel reaffirms his commitment to his family that he can also recognize the value of the social and political ideals he had mocked. The film not only links the radicalism of the thirties to that of the sixties; it also links family loyalty to the idea of political involvement, a far more original connection. The ending—which shows Daniel, his wife and young son taking part in an anti-war demonstration—verges on sentimentality, but it ties the film's ideas together. It is a moving endorsement of continuity: Daniel's determination to rebuild the family that had been destroyed leads to his rediscovery of the political activism that represents the best part of his parents' bequest to him. Without endorsing the fanaticism that Paul Isaacson surrendered to, the film does see the value of an allegiance to something beyond the self, and this is the heritage that Daniel chooses to honor at the end. Although this is one of the most wrenching and painful films ever conceived, it celebrates a miracle of rebirth and renewal; it ends with a scene of camaraderie that builds on the ruins of a murdered family.

Can it be purely coincidental that so many of the people involved in making this movie are the children of famous or prominent parents? Lumet's parents were both well-known actors in the Yiddish theater; Timothy Hutton is the son of actor Jim Hutton, a skilled and popular comic actor in films and television; Lindsay Crouse is the daughter of playwright Russell Crouse (co-author of *Life with Father*); Amanda Plummer is the daughter of Christopher Plummer and Tammy Grimes; John Rubinstein (who plays Daniel and Susan's adopted father) is the son of pianist Artur Rubinstein. All of them must have confronted the difficulty of growing up in the shadow of a famous parent, the tricky balancing act required to honor their parents while creating a distinct identity of their own. I do not mean to suggest that their experiences could have been anywhere near as agonized as the struggle of the Isaacsons' children to break free of the past. Yet in some way all of them had an intuitive understanding of the problems that the two Isaacson children face, and perhaps that helps to explain the passion that they bring to the film.

Lumet in particular has chosen to make a number of films about characters shaped by the past, tormented by their memories, struggling to come to terms with their heritage. It is the dilemma of the Tyrone family in O'Neill's masterpiece, *Long Day's Journey Into Night,* which Lumet filmed so effectively in 1962. As I have indicated, the same theme is central to *The Pawnbroker,* and it also adds resonance to Lumet's film of *The Group,* and to his underrated move *Bye Bye Braverman,* a tale of four friends haunted by their roots. *Daniel* returns to this theme of the overwhelming

power of the past, and this time Lumet dramatizes it with merciless honesty and rare eloquence.

By refusing to come to any conclusion about the Isaacsons' guilt or innocence, the film is clearly directing us to think about other issues. One of the most tantalizing ideas is the challenge of living with uncertainty. In some situations in life the truth is ultimately unknowable, and the dilemma that plagues Daniel is to make sense of an experience that he will never fully comprehend. Unfortunately, the film does not always treat this particular theme as lucidly as it might. Part of the problem is that it is structured like a detective story, with Daniel assuming the role of investigator, interviewing the witnesses and suspects who may be able to tell him the truth about his parents. As it moves toward its conclusion, the film leads us to expect a solution to the mystery. But it frustrates this expectation in a very long scene where Daniel confronts first the daughter of his parents' accuser, Dr. Mindish, and then Mindish himself. The fact that this sequence offers no real denouement is not the only problem; this happens to be the most clumsily acted, written, and directed sequence in the entire film, perhaps because Lumet and Doctorow were confused about what this scene *should* accomplish. One can guess at their intention. Daniel's quest for a solution is only partly to exonerate his parents; it also grows out of his desire to do something to save his sister. In this respect the sequence is relevant to the family drama that Daniel enacts and the transformation that he undergoes. But all in all the buildup seems too laborious, and the payoff too puny.

Other miscalculations weaken the film. Lumet has never before directed children in any significant roles in movies, and his inexperience shows in his handling of the actors who play Daniel and Susan as children. One can appreciate that he is aiming for understated, almost somnambulistic performances —to play against sentimentality, and to suggest the dehumanization of these children under such extreme stress. But the strategy doesn't really work; we are never quite certain whether the performances are so inexpressive because of a directorial master plan or because the director didn't know how to draw more subtle, nuanced performances from the children.

The other performances in the film are superb. Timothy Hutton would not seem to be ideally cast as a cynical Jewish graduate student, but he immerses himself in the role with such empathetic intensity that he succeeds in persuading us to share his torment. Amanda Plummer has two or three scenes of startling pathos as his sister, and Lindsay Crouse has the strength and the warmth to honor Rochelle's heroism in believably human terms. Mandy Patinkin, Edward Asner, John Rubinstein, and many others who have only tiny parts contribute indelible moments as well. Stylistically the film is a daring interweaving of past and present. Lumet and his cinematoggrapher Andrzej Bartkowiak draw obvious but potent visual contrasts between the stark world inhabited by the Isaacson children and the richer universe that nourished their parents. All the flashbacks are filmed in warm, nostalgic colors—dark reds, oranges and soft browns—while the present-day scenes are shot in antiseptic, institutional blue-gray tones.

Partly as a result of the performances, partly because of the meticulous recreations of the period, partly because of the power of the material and Lumet's passionate response to it, the film packs a shattering emotion punch. This may be the final point that makes critics uneasy; they don't like to feel so vulnerable. Is the movie manipulative in the way that it focuses on the suffering of children to win a surefire response? Or is it merely *effective* in involving us in its drama? In a sense all art is manipulative; it appeals to the emotions rather than to the intellect. One doesn't go to a dramatic film for the same measured, perfectly balanced argument that one would expect from a documentary or a piece of historical scholarship. There are certainly other perspectives on the period besides the one that this film offers, but I think it enriches our experience precisely because of its unashamed emotional appeal. At times detachment is not only a luxury but an evasion, and it is a response that this film will not permit.

Although *Daniel* is not simplistic in its view of the political beliefs of the characters, it does have a partisan, passionately held political point of view. It means to remind us of the horror of the Cold War, when human life was subordinated to the rigid demands of ideology. In the end, however, the film tran-

scends politics, for it affirms more fundamental values of familial love and loyalty that any political obsession easily betrays. *Daniel* calls up a black moment in our national history, confronts the worst possible nightmare of discord and devastation, and then points a way out of the darkness. —STEPHEN FARBER

IDENTIFICATION OF A WOMAN

Director: Michelangelo Antonioni. Screenplay: Michelangelo Antonioni and Gerard Brach with the collaboration of Tonino Guerra. Photography: Carlo di Palma. Editor: Michelangelo Antonioni.

Speaking of *Red Desert,* Antonioni once said that it was not a result but research, an apt description which could apply just as accurately to all his subsequent narrative films, until now. In *Identification of a Woman,* his first Italian film in nearly two decades,[1] Antonioni consolidates and refines the formal and thematic explorations made earlier, blending effortlessly the abstractions of the English-language films with the more intimate milieu and deeper mode of characterization of the Italian films. In addition to drawing from his prior experiments with color, movement, sound, and montage, Antonioni relaxes his strictures on the use of otherwise conventional formal devices by deploying numerous flashbacks and subjective inserts, an abundance of extra-diegetic ("New Wave") music, a freer use of the zoom, and, most surprisingly, dissolves. The result is Antonioni's most lucid work, which brilliantly highlights his most pressing concerns, while helping to illuminate further his previous efforts, especially the much maligned English-language films.

The film revolves around the middle-aged, middle-class Niccolo (Thomas Milian), a film director, and his relationship with Mavi (Daniela Silverio), a young, upper class woman. Niccolo receives anonymous threats to cease their relationship, but ignores them, with the result that his sister, Carla (Veronica Lazar), loses her position as chief gynecologist of a hospital. After two months, Mavi "disappears" by moving from her apartment without any word to Niccolo. He begins a relationship with Ida (Christine Boisson), a young avant-garde stage actress. After a few weeks, Ida's discovery that she is pregnant by another man ends the relationship. Niccolo, who all along had been seeking a serious subject for a new film, decides to make a science fiction film.

As always with Antonioni, plot summary yields scant indication of substance. It is in the wealth of plastic details and in their correspondences, rather, that his intentions are revealed. Set predominantly in Rome, *Identification* depicts a world beset by fear, some symptoms of which include a private alarm system, a gun-toting (and apologetic) neighbor, helplessly benumbed seminarians witnessing a street altercation, a harrowing panicked nocturnal drive at breakneck speed through dense fog, as well as more insidious effects on the character of individuals.

The surfeit of fear, so pervasive throughout the film, arises from what Antonioni sees as the fundamental problem of our age: the contemporary individual, bereft of any viable set of values, unable to maintain faith in any ideal, is becoming less and less prepared to adapt to the many unprecedented conditions of our rapidly changing world. This has been Antonioni's most persistent concern. In his Cannes statement of 1960 he wrote of the "unsuited and inadequate" old morality, "sustained out of cowardice or sheer laziness."[2] Since then, we have jettisoned much of the old morality, the sexual revolution being just one outcome, but the ethical void has yet to be filled. Thus without any set of values, and with the limitations of relying on the self-propulsion of egoism becoming ever more apparent, the "fears and terrors and stammerings that are associated with a period of gestation,"[3] are that much more evident. Accordingly, in *Identification,* Antonioni presents the individual as living in a constant state

IDENTIFICATION OF A WOMAN

scends politics, for it affirms more fundamental values of familial love and loyalty that any political obsession easily betrays. *Daniel* calls up a black moment in our national history, confronts the worst possible nightmare of discord and devastation, and then points a way out of the darkness. —STEPHEN FARBER

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Director: Michelangelo Antonioni. Screenplay: Michelangelo Antonioni and Gerard Brach with the collaboration of Tonino Guerra. Photography: Carlo di Palma. Editor: Michelangelo Antonioni.

Speaking of *Red Desert,* Antonioni once said that it was not a result but research, an apt description which could apply just as accurately to all his subsequent narrative films, until now. In *Identification of a Woman,* his first Italian film in nearly two decades,[1] Antonioni consolidates and refines the formal and thematic explorations made earlier, blending effortlessly the abstractions of the English-language films with the more intimate milieu and deeper mode of characterization of the Italian films. In addition to drawing from his prior experiments with color, movement, sound, and montage, Antonioni relaxes his strictures on the use of otherwise conventional formal devices by deploying numerous flashbacks and subjective inserts, an abundance of extra-diegetic ("New Wave") music, a freer use of the zoom, and, most surprisingly, dissolves. The result is Antonioni's most lucid work, which brilliantly highlights his most pressing concerns, while helping to illuminate further his previous efforts, especially the much maligned English-language films.

The film revolves around the middle-aged, middle-class Niccolo (Thomas Milian), a film director, and his relationship with Mavi (Daniela Silverio), a young, upper class woman. Niccolo receives anonymous threats to cease their relationship, but ignores them, with the result that his sister, Carla (Veronica Lazar), loses her position as chief gynecologist of a hospital. After two months, Mavi "disappears" by moving from her apartment without any word to Niccolo. He begins a relationship with Ida (Christine Boisson), a young avant-garde stage actress. After a few weeks, Ida's discovery that she is pregnant by another man ends the relationship. Niccolo, who all along had been seeking a serious subject for a new film, decides to make a science fiction film.

As always with Antonioni, plot summary yields scant indication of substance. It is in the wealth of plastic details and in their correspondences, rather, that his intentions are revealed. Set predominantly in Rome, *Identification* depicts a world beset by fear, some symptoms of which include a private alarm system, a gun-toting (and apologetic) neighbor, helplessly benumbed seminarians witnessing a street altercation, a harrowing panicked nocturnal drive at breakneck speed through dense fog, as well as more insidious effects on the character of individuals.

The surfeit of fear, so pervasive throughout the film, arises from what Antonioni sees as the fundamental problem of our age: the contemporary individual, bereft of any viable set of values, unable to maintain faith in any ideal, is becoming less and less prepared to adapt to the many unprecedented conditions of our rapidly changing world. This has been Antonioni's most persistent concern. In his Cannes statement of 1960 he wrote of the "unsuited and inadequate" old morality, "sustained out of cowardice or sheer laziness."[2] Since then, we have jettisoned much of the old morality, the sexual revolution being just one outcome, but the ethical void has yet to be filled. Thus without any set of values, and with the limitations of relying on the self-propulsion of egoism becoming ever more apparent, the "fears and terrors and stammerings that are associated with a period of gestation,"[3] are that much more evident. Accordingly, in *Identification,* Antonioni presents the individual as living in a constant state

IDENTIFICATION OF A WOMAN

of exigency, tending to rely not on a balanced use of reason and instinct, but on instinct, which is woefully regressive since adaptation "occurs not by instinct, but in spite of it."[4]

Backed into the corner of his/her own psychic chaos, the modern individual has been reduced to a primitive level at which the sole criterion for action is the instinct for self-survival, the consequence of which finds the individual at odds with the good of the larger community, unravelling the social fabric to the point where we, as technologically sophisticated barbarians, annihilate each other. A frightening vision, no doubt, but not despairing, for Antonioni still sees the possibility of finding new values appropriate to our age.

In doors, the dominant visual motif of *Identification,* Antonioni has found the ideal object with which to suggest the moral condition of each character: when, how, or if a character passes through a doorway accentuated the ethical nature of his or her actions. This is a formal strategy Antonioni wastes no time in implementing. The first image of the film appears simply to be a floor-level shot of a wall imprinted with a subdued geometrical design. The longer this image is held, however, its perspective begins to seem out of joint, as the surety of the initial impression gradually gives way to uncertainty, to which the film's intermittently obstructing titles only add. Then, what at first seems to be a piece of the floor rises at an acute angle from the base of the image, but reveals itself to be something quite different: an opening door, seen from above. This spatial dislocation, from an assumed viewpoint grounded securely on the floor to one situated precariously off the side of a wall above the door, is disorientating to say the least. And into this disorientating image walks Niccolo, the most ethically disoriented of the film's major characters. Antonioni quickly augments the door/ethics correlation, as Niccolo, after climbing the stairs to his own apartment's door and realizing he's lost his keys, mumbles four times the word "karma."

A closer look at Niccolo and the film's two other major characters will help in getting a better idea of just how Antonioni conveys his concerns.

Niccolo differs from Antonioni's previous male protagonists in that he is surprisingly affable and a much more credible object of women's affections. The difference stops there, however; as with the others, his bad habits—selfishness, egoism, irresponsibility—overcome him. In his relationship with Mavi, in their numerous torrid love scenes, or when, for example, he places a blanket on the sleeping Mavi and watches over her, Niccolo appears to be attentive, generous and caring, but as Mavi tells him later, he cares for her physical, not her emotional health. And even this is cast in doubt when Mavi tells him (to the accompaniment of an off-screen siren), that the doctor ordered abstention from sexual activity, and he responds "one time can't hurt." Needless to say, the one time turns to many times.

Niccolo's love relationships are strikingly impersonal; it doesn't seem to matter whom he's involved with. To Niccolo, a woman is more a habit than an individual. Although Niccolo professes to search for "the ideal woman" as inspiration for his next film, he views the real women in his life as objects, or interchangeable parts. When Niccolo discusses his chimerical search with a male friend, the latter asks about Mavi, whom Niccolo contemptuously dismisses from having anything to do with it. This dichotomous view of women is hinted at early in the film during this first conversation with Mavi.[5] While waiting to see his sister in her office, Niccolo answers the phone and receives Mavi's call to make an appointment. Niccolo likes the sound of her voice and arranges a date with her. In the course of their short conversation, while he tells her "I'm uneasy when I can't visualize the person I'm talking to," he looks at an x-ray of another woman. His talking to one woman while looking at or thinking of another is perfectly in keeping with his habitually divided attention. This is even more apparent in a later scene, when, after his unsuccessful initial search for Mavi, Niccolo is on a date with another woman (possibly his ex-wife) whom he quickly discards when he sees Ida for the first time.

The habitual nature of Niccolo's behavior is given salient expression in the scene where he does succeed in tracing Mavi to her new home. While Niccolo hides on the landing above her apartment, Mavi returns from the outside, but must wait to enter the apartment until her roommate unjams the door lock. In

the meantime, Mavi searches for matches to light a cigarette. Niccolo, who has been secretly watching, begins to move forward, his arm outstretched with lighter in hand. Suddenly, as if realizing the absurdity of his unthinking actions, he stops, and abandons his attempts to talk to Mavi.

On the very next day, when Niccolo and Ida take a trip to Venice, the tenuousness of his affections becomes glaringly evident. As they are out in a small boat on the lagoon, he suggests to Ida that marriage would be a "solution" to their problem. (This must surely be the most unromantic marriage proposal ever portrayed in a film.) The proposed solution, similar in spirit to what Antonioni termed the "mutual pity" informing the end of *L'Avventura,* is, however, short lived. Upon returning to their hotel, Ida receives a phone call and learns of the positive results of her pregnancy test. Niccolo is cold at best when he thinks the child is his, and then downright callous when Ida realizes she already had been pregnant when she and Niccolo first met. Ida-as-mother no longer fits Niccolo's solution scheme. Proposing only moments ago, Niccolo now seems a stranger, and long before the scene's conclusion, his final response is intimated by the hundreds of pigeons seen through the glass doors of the hotel. When Niccolo walks up to those doors we already know that he will take flight from Ida.

Niccolo is not the only male in the film to exhibit less than admirable behavior. The scene in which Niccolo waits in the hospital to see his sister begins with a shot of a pregnant woman moving out of the frame. When Carla comes into the waiting room and Niccolo approaches her, a man suddenly runs up to them shouting "I was first." Naturally this man is not waiting to see the gynecologist; his wife, presumably that pregnant woman, is. The man's use of the first person singular to the exclusion of his wife is true to a type of male self-centeredness. In this same sequence, Carla tells Niccolo she has lost her position at the hospital. Even though it was Niccolo who had received the threats about continuing his relationship with Mavi, it is Carla who is victimized: another female casualty in the petty battle of male egos, in this case between Niccolo and, as it turns out, Mavi's well-connected father. Taken together, Niccolo's behavior and the seemingly incidental acts of the film's other men form a rather unflattering portrait of the modern male, one which might best be titled, "Objectification of Women." The film's actual title is somewhat ironic as it suggests that which Niccolo is incapable of accomplishing, much less conceiving; for how could someone who views all women as essentially the same think of identifying *a* woman?

A recapitulation of this failing of Niccolo's occurs near the end in one brief shot of him returning to his apartment building after the trip to Venice. From a medium close-up of a statue of a woman, the camera tilts down to reveal Niccolo turning away from the statue. The statue, like the ever-growing collage of photographs of women that Niccolo amasses in his apartment, defines the extent of his relationship with women: remote objects to be contemplated, completely void of any genuine emotional association. The tilt itself, by barring Niccolo from sharing the frame with the statue, expresses the separation between Niccolo and his chosen object(s) of contemplation.

Conversely, through his empathic portrayal of his female characters, Antonioni not only comes closer to the promise of the film's title, but goes beyond it to approximate something of an identification *with* these women. Mavi is the most ambivalent character in the film. She is also the most self-destructive. Her sensitive and essentially honest nature conflicts with her own wealth and upbringing. Assimilated into the bohemian fringe, she eschews outward display of wealth by no longer spending time with her "old crowd," and by living in modest apartments located in run-down neighborhoods complete with Socialist Party posters and Communist graffiti. But the only activities we see her involved in—making love, attending parties, and shopping—belie that image, and affirm that hers is actually a life of purposeless leisure, supported by enormous wealth. These consciousness-obliterating activities offer her immediate relief at the cost of long-term stability, and constitute a prevalent form of myopic behavior. This is true especially of her sexual activity; despite the doctor's orders, she risks her health for its swift narcotic effect. That Mavi admits to having "problems" in sexual matters is significant too, as it intimates a possible aware-

ness of, and inner dissatisfaction with, the inordinate disparity of importance between her sexual activity and everything else in her life. Further indications that something is amiss with Mavi's sexual life are her unwillingness to undress fully, and her intensely narcissistic gaze at her own face in a mirror during her one on-screen orgasm.

Mavi's addiction to sexually induced oblivion (her sexual appetite is reflected in her last name: Lupus) is so strong that it overpowers her intense anger at Niccolo and her awareness of the necessity to end their relationship. A simple pan and dissolve beautifully conveys this when they are in a country house following their harrowing drive through the fog. As they cease their discussion, which leaves no doubt as to the terminal nature of their relationship, Mavi suddenly runs to Niccolo, and they embrace. The camera pans left away from them, revealing a burning fireplace at the side of the frame and a closed door in the background. The image dissolves to the same set-up with the door—the bedroom door—open, thus effectively suggesting that the heat of her passion literally dissolves her conscious resentment of, and resistance to, this man she knows she should no longer be with.

But all is not hopeless with Mavi. She does leave Niccolo, albeit in a cowardly fashion, and she survives a difficult test of her resolve in the scene where Niccolo tracks her to her new apartment. Here, Antonioni employs the apartment building interior as a concise metaphor for the labyrinth of Mavi's emotional state. Barred from entering her new home and from being with her new (female) lover, Mavi waits impatiently for the door to open. She asks her friend why she has locked the door in the first place, and when told that Niccolo earlier had been looking for her, she runs downstairs and slams closed the front door to the apartment building, thus placing herself in a state of limbo between these two doors and two relationships. As yet unable to truly enter the door to a new life, she desperately attempts to keep out her previous life—even though, in the form of Niccolo who is on the next landing) it is still an active element in her emotions. Once inside, however, Mavi closes the door behind her, and secures passage to a new phase in her life. In one of Antonioni's most emotionally moving scenes (oozing with romantic piano music of a sort not heard since *Il Grido*), Mavi moves to a window overlooking the street in which Niccolo now stands looking up. Hiding at first, Mavi moves directly before the window, at last confronting Niccolo and her own cowardice, and issues a wordless "addio." "Will you leave me too?" asks Mavi's new lover. Turning momentarily from the window, Mavi says no. When she turns back to the window, Niccolo is no longer there. The outcome of Mavi's new relationship admittedly remains ambiguous (she had female lovers before Niccolo), but this last scene of hers does intimate a positive change in her life.

Ida is different. Down to earth and honest, she is the strongest character in the film. From a poor background, she has worked from an early age. In contrast to Mavi's fruitless activities, Ida works most of the time as an actress. In her spare time we see her writing and horseback riding. She works in the city and lives in the country, demonstrating her ability to easily bridge urban and rural existences, while underscoring her life's fundamental balance, something the other characters sorely lack. Although she exudes a strong sense of sexuality, we do not see her in any explicit love scene with Niccolo as we do with him and Mavi, for sex is not an all-encompassing impulse for Ida. Nor does Ida possess any hang-ups about being nude; she performs her stage work in the nude, and the one time she actually appears undressed in the film occurs as she is on the toilet in her bathroom—which has no door, indicating that body functions are shamelessly integrated elements in her balanced existence.

Ida's ingenuousness infuses a transparency into her relationship with Niccolo, which is in marked contrast to the relationship of Mavi and Niccolo, so shrouded in a miasma of subtle deceptions, evasions and rampant anxieties. Indicative of the converse nature of these two relationships are the two extended exterior sequences in the film: the fog sequence, with its heavily laden atmosphere of fear, mistrust, and confusion, perfectly illustrating the equivocal nature of Mavi and Niccolo's relationship, and the lagoon sequence, with its clear perspective leading all the way to the horizon, characterizing the genuineness of Ida and Niccolo's relationship. This is not to say the

latter scene is winsome; indeed, it is quite the contrary. Its image of two people alone on an otherwise empty and vast body of water hauntingly conveys what Jung termed the "unenviable loneliness" of modern existence. Furthermore, the scene exudes not a cryptic loneliness, offering the possibility for evasion, but a loneliness so conspicuous that in the dead of silence it cries out for recognition and examination. As demonstrated in her conversation with Niccolo, these are demands Ida candidly complies with.

Ida's is an authentic existence. Like anyone else she is prey to the modern world's attendant anxieties, but rather than evade or repress awareness of them, she confronts them, attempting to alleviate a problem, or learning to adapt to its existence. A good example of this can be seen in her response to Niccolo's continuing obsession with finding Mavi. Rather than ignoring the situation in the hope it might disappear on its own, and despite the risk to her newly flourishing relationship with Niccolo, of her own accord Ida searches for and discovers information which leads him to Mavi's whereabouts.

Ida's authenticity manifests itself most outstandingly when, after just having agreed to Niccolo's marriage proposal, she is placed in a quandary from which some kind of hedging might sympathetically be expected. Ida greets the news of her pregnancy with unalloyed joy, and when Niccolo asks if the news is good or bad, she doesn't hesitate to reply affirmatively. But when she begins to ponder the possible effects on her relationship with Niccolo, she changes her answer to "I don't know." Niccolo's blunt reaction to the news of her pregnancy forces Ida to summon up the courage to weigh the two new developments in her life, marriage and pregnancy, which are suddenly at odds with each other. With an inspiring honesty and courage Ida does something no other character in the film does: she sacrifices immediate self-satisfaction for something and someone else, the future and the child. Coming as it does toward the end of a film with numerous evocations of weakness and sterility, Ida's decision is a singularly striking affirmation of human responsibility and hope.

The prominence given to Ida's forthcoming child and Niccolo's nephew in *Identification* brings to the foreground a significant element in most of Antonioni's work: the figure of the child. While children have been more noticeable in certain films (e.g., *Il Grido, Red Desert*), their appearances in the others, no matter how brief, have been of equal importance in conveying Antonioni's cautionary implications for the future. In *Blow-up* and *Zabriskie Point,* children watch very intently the actions of their erring elders, waiting for their first chance at emulation. Children appear throughout *The Passenger,* some acting as a stimulus for the old Spaniard's fatalistic discourse: "Other people look at them and they imagine a new world. But me, when I watch them, I see the same old tragedy begin all over again." These sentiments are then visually articulated in that film's penultimate shot: a child, who had been throwing rocks at another old man, runs off screen at the same time and frame location as Locke's killers drive on screen, amounting to a temporal compression of mankind's tragically perpetual passage from the child's misguided "play"' of rock throwing to the adult's murderous intent of bullet shooting.

The difference in the way children are perceived in *Identification* consists of an emphasis on the uncertainty of their continued existence. One of the key images of the film is an empty birds nest, seen from the balcony of Niccolo's apartment. The image is presented twice, but it is not until the second time, when his nephew questions Niccolo about it, that its significance becomes clear. To the child's question of where the birds are when the nest is empty, Niccolo responds that they are flying around, thereby linking the notion of sterility with flight.

Although flight from the responsibility for one's own existence long has been an enduring major theme of Antonioni, the flight imagery in *Identification* is more subtle than in *La Notte,* for example, with its lengthy rockets sequence and its revealing reference to Hermann Broch's extraordinary novel *The Sleepwalkers,* a book with numerous digressions on the nature of flight, or *Zabriskie Point,* with its elaborate stolen airplane sequence. Nonetheless, the characters, save for Ida, are engaged in the same kind and, at the very least, the same degree of flight of their counterparts in the earlier films. Moreover, Antonioni has

widened his field of scrutiny beyond the individual's flight to include the larger ramifications of widespread flight.

As in the previous films, men are the preponderant perpetrators of flight, the worst consequences of which are left for mothers and children to face. This is clearly the case with Niccolo's sister, and, of course, Ida. To highlight this male complicity, throughout the film Antonioni juxtaposes the male in flight with the woman's role of mother: Niccolo passes a door through which emanates a pop song, "Mamacita"; he looks at a magazine photo of a woman giving birth; he shares the waiting room with a pregnant woman; and we see him with Carla, a single mother, and Ida, an expectant one.

But even more severely affected than women are children, depicted here as victims of neglect. Not only do we see and hear of Niccolo's inattentive relationship with his fatherless nephew, but Mavi herself is shown to have borne needless suffering from the abnegation of paternal responsibility, made only more painful when her mother's current lover, a man Mavi has always despised, suddenly discloses to her, undoubtedly out of his own selfish need to assuage guilt, that he is her father.

With this ongoing mass male migration from paternal responsibility, women understandably are becoming less willing to bear children, and many, like Mavi and her friends, have taken to what hitherto has been for the most part in Antonioni's work a predominantly male activity: sexual flight. With procreation as the end of sexual union becoming anathema in our time, *Identification* looks beyond the breakup of the nuclear family, prefiguring the dissolution of all families. The empty birds nest, then, is a telling symbolic portent of what might become of the human future.

Another theme running parallel to that of threatened procreation is the sterility, or failure, of imagination, wherein our endeavors in the arts and sciences likewise have fallen prey to myopia and flight. The conspicuous consumption of facts and information, like the attainment of sexual gratification, has become an end in itself, with the desire for knowledge having replaced the quest for wisdom. Again, this is not new in Antonioni: Thomas in *Blow-up,* despite his learning the process of observation (sorting out facts from a vast accumulation of visual information) remains ethically vacuous and is thus paralyzed at the end; in *Zabriskie Point,* the apparently inexorable tragedy of the self-destruction of a technological miracle crystallizes in the image of books—the recorded accumulation of knowledge—exploding to the accompaniment of an agonized scream; and in the final shot of *The Passenger,* a driver education car, in which a student is learning how to drive, but not knowing where to go, at last moves haphazardly to the left—which, in the film's network of directional connotation, leads to destruction. In essence, all are brilliant illustrations of the aspect of the modern dilemma which John Herman Randall, Jr. concisely summarized: "The modern physicist tries to give man God's knowledge of how to do it, but he has overlooked the knowledge of what is best to do."[6]

Identification gives this theme added emphasis and urgency. Upon his return home from the trip to Venice, Niccolo takes yet another flight, this time in his work, by surrendering to the new mysticism, namely, science fiction.[7] Accompanying an image of an asteroid travelling through space is Niccolo's voice-over synopsis of what he images to be his new film: scientists have converted this asteroid into a spaceship so as to be able to fly close to the sun. Niccolo's nephew is heard questioning the credibility of a ship flying so close to the sun, to which Niccolo cynically responds, "The laws of science fiction leave many doors open." His nephew then asks why they should be flying to the sun, with Niccolo responding, "So we'll get to know how the universe was made, and to know the cause of things." Finally, with uncharacteristically verbal directness, Antonioni compellingly conveys the problem of the contemporary mind-set of attending to process without consideration of purpose, as he leaves it to the child to beg the question of our age: "And then?"

In each of Antonioni's films, especially those in color, there exists a proportionate relationship between the sheer beauty of the images and the terrible reality contained in them. *Identification* contains at one and the same time Antonioni's most beautiful images

and the most terrifying truths, and might be said to be the latest of a series of metaphysical horror films. But these films are much more than exquisite images of desolation—nothing could be further from a passive acceptance of the world's ills. "Profoundly political in its objective,"[8] Antonioni's work seeks to expose the inherent contradictions of our age, and offers the prerequisite for effecting positive change, understanding. In this context, *Identification of a Woman* is the most severe of Antonioni's films, and, as he has described it, his "most sincere."[9] —WILLIAM KELLY

NOTES

1. In 1979, Antonioni made *Il Misterio di Oberwald* for Italian television. Based on one of Cocteau's lesser plays, "The Eagle Has Two Heads," it was shot and edited in video and later transferred to film. Hardly an "Antonioni film," its only real interest lies in the director's use of electronic color modification within scenes. In addition, his extensive use of the video technique of keying in may have caused Antonioni to reassess the value of dissolves in film.
2. *Film Makers On Film Making,* ed. Harry M. Geduld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1969), p. 208.
3. Antonioni, *ibid.,* p. 209.
4. Eugene Marais, *The Soul of the Ape,* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 174. A study of the origins of primate consciousness, this is the book that book Locke and Robertson coincidentally were reading in *The Passenger.* Besides being a naturalist, Marais was many things, including journalist and gun-runner.
5. Although this is their initial conversation, it is the second time we see him talk to Mavi. Using a strategy he deployed in *Zabriskie Point* (the flashback of Daria's first scene), Antonioni structures a large portion of *Identification,* from Niccolo's wait in Carla's office to Mavi's late arrival at Niccolo's apartment, as a flashback which isn't immediately apparent as such.
6. *The Making of the Modern Mind,* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940), p. 100. One further indication of the persistence of this theme in Antonioni's work is the title of his aborted Amazon project, "Technically Sweet," which he took from a comment by Robert Oppenheimer: "If one has a glimpse of something that seems technically sweet, one attacks this thing and achieves it." (Quoted in R. T. Witcombe, *The New Italian Cinema,* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1982], p. 8.)
7. This is not to say that science fiction is intrinsically so, but, unfortunately, it is a rare film of the genre that escapes this description. Antonioni himself is not opposed to science fiction per se, as indicated in his own thwarted plans to make a science fiction film in the Soviet Union (see "La Méthode de Michelangelo Antonioni," *Cahiers du Cinéma,* No. 342, December 1982, p. 64). Also, while Niccolo's intention to make *any* film could be seen as some kind of victory, the context of *Identification* renders it a shallow one at best.
8. Witcombe, p. 3.
9. Antonioni, before the screening of the film at the 1982 New York Film Festival.

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MERRY CHRISTMAS, MR. LAWRENCE

Director: Nagisa Oshima. Script: Oshima and Paul Mayersberg. Producer: Jeremy Thomas. Photography: Toichiro Narushima. Editing: Tomoyko Oshima. Music: Ryuichi Sakamoto. Universal.

The offensive and defensive postures adopted by the characters and cultures in Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* seems to appeal to many of the conventions of the POW camp genre: "captivating captives," whose cultural identity holds their captors enthralled. The close quarters of the camp create the razor's edge of a truce, where all psychological thrusts and parries of ideological conflict seem locked in combat, like ancient warriors frozen in grappling postures on classical Greek vases. The monopoly on violence held by the Japanese running the camp is counterpoised by the monopoly on spirit held by the British prisoners. Unfortunately (for those of us skeptics who don't believe in it), Oshima seems to have swallowed many of the clichés of the "there will always be an England" sort and regurgitated them in the immortal, Kabuki-like face of certainty that there will, indeed, always be a Japan. These little islands of empire, each providing a pristine model for its hemisphere's notions of honor and dignity, have provided Oshima the subject for a dialectic exercise. Ideas loom

and the most terrifying truths, and might be said to be the latest of a series of metaphysical horror films. But these films are much more than exquisite images of desolation—nothing could be further from a passive acceptance of the world's ills. "Profoundly political in its objective,"[8] Antonioni's work seeks to expose the inherent contradictions of our age, and offers the prerequisite for effecting positive change, understanding. In this context, *Identification of a Woman* is the most severe of Antonioni's films, and, as he has described it, his "most sincere."[9] —WILLIAM KELLY

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MERRY CHRISTMAS, MR. LAWRENCE

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The offensive and defensive postures adopted by the characters and cultures in Nagisa Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* seems to appeal to many of the conventions of the POW camp genre: "captivating captives," whose cultural identity holds their captors enthralled. The close quarters of the camp create the razor's edge of a truce, where all psychological thrusts and parries of ideological conflict seem locked in combat, like ancient warriors frozen in grappling postures on classical Greek vases. The monopoly on violence held by the Japanese running the camp is counterpoised by the monopoly on spirit held by the British prisoners. Unfortunately (for those of us skeptics who don't believe in it), Oshima seems to have swallowed many of the clichés of the "there will always be an England" sort and regurgitated them in the immortal, Kabuki-like face of certainty that there will, indeed, always be a Japan. These little islands of empire, each providing a pristine model for its hemisphere's notions of honor and dignity, have provided Oshima the subject for a dialectic exercise. Ideas loom

larger than characters, indeed displacing them for the most part.

Contributing to Oshima's strategy is David Bowie, whose tactics are those of his musical performances—the synthesis of a character's form and function into mime-like elegance. (Perhaps Bowie's early training in mime has shaped his performances more than has been suspected.) Bowie does not embody or act; he represents. His powerful presence renders him a cipher or hieroglyphic distillation of whatever it is he is meant to portray. In Oshima's hands, which are adept at the brush strokes of Japanese characters, this Englishman becomes a "Japanese translation" of all that is essentially English—from William the Conqueror to Oscar Wilde. For Western audience, it is Bowie's presence, even more than that of the quixotic *and* exotic Japanese cast, which stylizes the film.

While most contemporary war films attempt to deglamorize their subject, Oshima's virtually mythologizes the role of the warrior and uses the POW camp as the last bastion of archaic, personalized warfare. On the other hand, it seems that whole civilizations are represented by these warriors. Based on the novel *The Seed and the Sower* by Laurens van der Post, the film addresses itself to cross-cultural affinities and misunderstandings. The absurdity and incomprehension of these two very diverse cultures at war is the point of the film—made perfectly clear by Oshima at his Cannes press conference, a point which the following review will attempt to sort out.

A prisoner of war camp in Java in 1942 is being run by a young commandant, Captain Yonoi, in utter disregard of conventions agreed upon at Geneva or anywhere else concerning the treatment of prisoners. The opening scene conjures up all the hoary tales of Japan's wartime atrocities and violence. Yonoi has ordered one of his Korean guards to commit harakiri—intending to do him a favor!—for homosexually fraternizing with the enemy, a young Dutch prisoner, De Jong. Colonel Lawrence, the British liaison between prisoners and the commander, convinces Yonoi to postpone it, until after his return from a military tribunal. The De Jong affair seems to be incomprehensibly inflated by the hysterical Yonoi, but it gradually acquires the value of a psychogram for the relationship Yonoi develops with an excessively handsome new prisoner, Jack Celliers, whom he brings back to the camp after attending his military trial.

Celliers enters the camp ready to radicalize an already antagonized situation. Both British and Japanese show signs of breaking under the strain. The eponymous hero of the film (modestly and minimally played by English actor Tom Conti) seems to have the proverbial overview, and yet he is incapable of imparting a shred of his wisdom or even understanding to either side. The Japanese seem loath to lend credence to the higher rationality he represents, as if there can be no values other than the sheer self-interest of either party. Lawrence's own colleague, Captain Hicksley (Jack Thompson), finds himself more in line with the enemy's estimation of Colonel Lawrence than one would hope; but then Hicksley is an Australian and more British than the British in his attention to military detail. Lawrence subsequently becomes a kind of moral midpoint between the two sides, the almost Renoirian man of reason and discretion and sense, against whom the twin opposed tragic views play themselves out to mutual disaster.

Colonel Lawrence becomes the fulcrum in the development of this relationship, both in his official capacity as the liaison officer and in his interest in and understanding of Japanese culture. His role is to mediate for the

What "Merry Christmas, Mr. Lawrence" means has been the single most controversial question about the film—a semantic controversy which raises the problem of "cultural contamination" (an unpopular and unfashionable anthropological theory that goes with the idea of "cultural evolution") to the same level of abstraction Nagisa Oshima previously attained in the existential eroticism of *Empire of the Senses*. The barriers that exist between cultures become most evident in a simple comparison of this film's sundry release titles. In Japan, the expression "Merry Christmas" is virtually without meaning for obvious reasons, and it takes on a somewhat exotic, evocative flavor comparable to Americans brandishing "Sayonara." The Japanese title is *Senjo no Merry Xmas* (Merry Christmas on the Battlefield), guaranteed to create some confusion about the story, which does not include a battlefield. In Europe the Japanese title *Furyo* leaves little doubt about its Japanese origins, while a translation remains deliberately unavailable (it means "prisoner of war").

military and translate languages and customs, but, in the case of Yonoi and Celliers, to stand by helplessly, because their communication takes place in a realm beyond translation—in a "realm of offenses" that can only be understood by Yonoi and Celliers. The metaphysical conflict of kindred spirits, both of them warriors removed from the "real" battlefield, necessitates waging war on a cultural and psychological plane. The Japanese tradition of conformity to type—even if that type evokes the asocial samurai—is confronted by an equally strong and culturally valid tradition of the outsider found in the English eccentric, even when the eccentric such as Celliers is serving the most rigid of British institutions, its military. Although this conflict seems waged in the stratosphere of the abstract, Oshima portrays a mysterious unity of spirit and potential for agonized mutual respect between radically different cultures, defying each other momentarily in a bizarre manner not at all befitting officers and gentlemen in the traditions of *The Bridge on the River Kwai* and *La Grande Illusion*.

Oshima's preference for filming taboo subjects is here reflected in his framing the story as one of homosexual bonding between avowed enemies, made explicit in the opening scene and implicit in the male bonding that dominates the military life of a POW camp. In repeated interviews, Oshima naively claimed, "I just wanted to show that a homosexual rapport can exist between two supposed enemies." One could go even further and assert that, from a psychological point of view, a "rapport" or desire must exist between enemies, even ones intent on mutual annihilation, because, as luminaries such as Norman Mailer have so distressingly illustrated, the will to survive is inextricably entangled with the sex drive. Moreover, the destructive nature of that will, that drive toward total possession, is demonstrated and surely vented in the rape and plunder after battle. In *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence,* the only trophies available to the Japanese are the captives themselves, while to the British, every instance of Japanese frustration is a kind of trophy. Yet in a POW camp, as in a prison, both guards and guarded are "captives" in the strictest sense of the word. From Celliers's perspective, it would seem that the sexual instinct is the best way

Major Celliers and Captain Yonoi in MERRY CHRISTMAS MR. LAWRENCE

to destroy Yonoi; the enemy is to be violated where he is most vulnerable and repressed.

For reasons not made entirely clear (although the very idea invokes those experts from this film's noble ancestor who blew up their bridge on the Kwai), Yonoi repeatedly asks Lawrence for the names of the munitions experts in his company and is denied the information, which sends him into fits of outrage and cruelty. In one of these scenes, when Yonoi has exposed himself to the cruelest depths by commanding all the prisoners to witness a beheading, Celliers rushes forth, breaking ranks, to kiss Yonoi, infusing the hatred with its exuberant alternative, love or eroticism. Effectively, he "rapes" Yonoi, who loses his consciousness and even his post as camp commander. Celliers's act is a calculated kamikazi dive, meant to humiliate Yonoi, for which Celliers is put to death by the succeeding commander in an ignominious and barbaric fashion associated with POW tales from the South Pacific: he is buried up to his neck and left in the sun to die. The visual impact is that of a beheading—and, of course, psychologically speaking, castration.

The motivation for Jack Celliers's defiant stance is to be found in flashback sequences of his youth and his relationship to his little brother (James Malcolm). Defying Yonoi's command that the prisoners be put on a fast, Celliers saunters in with food, openly flaunting Yonoi's authority. Celliers and Lawrence are locked away in the stockade together. Here, Celliers confesses to "an expertise in betrayal" and sequences from their youth at boarding school reveals a complicated relationship with his little brother, whose slight deformity contrasts with the Aryan splendor

of David Bowie. But the kid can sing! The young boy desperately wants his older brother's approval, which his song so aptly expresses, and this, presumably, foreshadows Yonoi's more repressed appeal for approval. Ah, but the imagination is stretched even further.

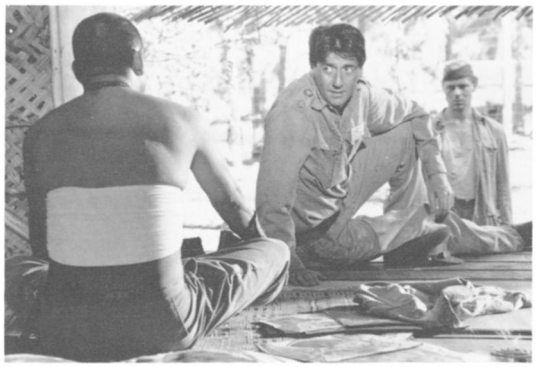
Scenes at the school are given a very stylized presentation. There is, for example, a complicated camera movement from an empty quad to a close-up of the two brothers on vacant steps leading nowhere. Jack's failure to rescue or intervene in a tormenting hazing of his little brother looms over the scene. Shots of the family garden, lush and too tropical for England (shot, in fact, in New Zealand), then establish a lyrical mood over the memory sequences, and they presumably explain a later remark of Celliers: "I wish I could sing," suggesting—again, presumably—"I wish I had the devotion and the purity of talent of my little brother." Nevertheless, it doesn't work; the flashback sequences serve as a psychological explication and a delay mechanism where none is necessary. They break the tension of the progression of events in the camp itself which has sharpened to become a microcosm of the war in the Pacific as personified by the characters Yonoi and Celliers.

By reserving the leading roles for rockstars, Oshima takes advantage of the cultural icons made possible by popular culture's elevation of currently fashionable and glamorous types. An even more direct appeal to such trendiness is made by the film's score, a powerful fusion of Japanese rock and electronic music appropriately subtle for a complex film, composed by Bowie's opposite number in the film and in real-life Japan, Ryuichi Sakamoto, a 31-year-old keyboard wizard and soloist who also did the vocal version of the theme from *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence.*

Sakamoto in the role of Yonoi brings to it no less panache than that which Bowie brings to a role, and both stars serve Oshima's purpose. The director's stated interest in singers lies in what he calls their "very vivid sense of representation and of modernity," which could be explained, in part, by a singer's need to compress into the few minutes of a song the interpretation of an entire character or situation, while the "modernity" need be explained only in terms of their contemporary success, however ephemeral. Certainly, the audience's inevitable awareness that it is David Bowie playing the role (and for the Japanese, the equally great awareness of Sakamoto) necessitates a contemporary interpretation of the conflict in the film. It is, however, undermined by allowing Bowie the line, "I wish I could sing." Too self-reflective, it draws attention to the idolatry surrounding these performers, and Oshima runs the risk of giving their characters the abstract quality of deities. Likewise, Sakamoto's make-up is pronounced and appropriate more to "performance" than to acting, setting him apart from the more naturalistic Japanese characters. It should, furthermore, be noted that Yonoi's personal style on the film would have been as much a cultural throwback then as the current fad for Kabuki in transistorized Japan.

In contrast, other characters are given more depth by good character actors such as Jack Thompson, who plays Captain Hicksley, a bow-legged soldier's soldier and Australian macho who seems to be such a clear and uncomplicated alternative to Colonel Lawrence, as well as his second in command, that Yonoi would like to replace Lawrence with Hicksley—a highly irregular move, since the highest ranking officer is, by regulation, the liaison officer between his fellow prisoners and the camp commander. Hicksley, in his turn, disapproves of Colonel Lawrence's sensitivity and understanding of Japanese subtleties. Lawrence, however, admits to the limitations of his own understanding when he damns the "Kamigami" or Japanese divinities who create the models for Yonoi's arbitrary cruelty, or even for the superstition of Yonoi's subordinate officer, Sgt. Hara. Sgt. Hara is depicted as draped with sundry medallions and religious tokens, yet he is, like Lawrence, caught between East and West. Played by the renowned Japanese comedian and satirist Takeshi, Sgt. Hara alternates between being jovial and accommodating in the more human characterization of *bushido* (the samurai chivalry of Japan) and being the intimidated puppet of Yonoi.

It is Sgt. Hara who brings the story a certain symmetry in a final scene set four years later in 1946, in a cell where Hara awaits his execution as a war criminal. He has since learned



"Mr." Lawrence, the go-between (Tom Conti).

English (the Lord's prayer, for all the good it will do him!) and the implications of "Merry Christmas," a phrase and excuse he had used in a fit of drunken benevolence to summon Lawrence and Celliers and get them out of the stockade on Christmas eve, 1942. During Lawrence's visit, Hara tells him that Yonoi had asked Hara to dedicate Celliers's lock of hair at an ancestral shrine.

Yonoi's intentions upon cutting that lock of hair from the still visible head of the buried Celliers become clear. Yonoi's acknowledgement of Celliers's powers are made explicit, and they become again the focus of the film. Like the reversal of fortunes that characterizes Hara's and Lawrence's relationship, the lock of hair implies Celliers's "victory over death," at least, however, he had already been made a martyr in a scene of the head scorched in the sun, photographed through a fence so that the barbed wire creates striations across the image, while the camera moves in to reveal a white moth hovering around the cheek. It is at this point that Yonoi, to the general amazement of the assembly from the camp, cuts a lock of Celliers's hair and then steps back to salute the unconscious head, or perhaps the "winged spirit" implied by the moth. (The symbolic value of the moth, it turns out, was not part of the original conception but rather an addition suggested by Bowie when the moth made its unerring way into the shot.) The mystical terms of this denouement are in the spirit of *The Seed and the Sower,* from which comes the quotation, "Celliers by his death sowed a seed in Yonoi that we all might share in its growth."

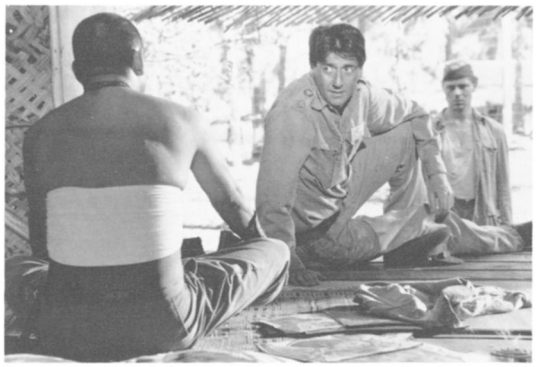
The cross-fertilization of these two cultures has been captured by Oshima at its very inception—the forgiveness and reconciliation between Lawrence and Hara, who nevertheless dies for war crimes. Lawrence cannot extend to Hara the benevolence he himself had enjoyed, because larger political forces have taken over, out of the control of the individual. Oshima (and script-writer Paul Mayersberg) touch fleetingly here on the problem of war crimes, as Lawrence pronounces Hara one of the "victims of men who think they are right." Slowly the camera pulls up to an overhead shot of their two heads, their features invisible and thereby somehow united as victims. The fundamental question behind Oshima's film about two great military traditions in the confines of a camp—not embattled but rather locked in an embrace of death—is the question of honor. To the Japanese, honor is obedience. To the British, honor is doing the right and just thing. Their combined tragedy is reflected in their mutual obedience to men who think they are doing the right thing. —KAREN JAEHNE

TESTAMENT

Director: Lynne Littman. Script: John Sacret Young, based on "The Last Testament" by Carol Amen. Photography: Steven Poster. Music: James Horner. Paramount.

Lynne Littman's *Testament* is definitely 1983's most remarkable antinuclear statement from the film industry, all the more notable because, like ABC's *The Day After,* it was also originally a made-for-TV movie (PBS). Unlike *The Day After,* however, which was broadcast as a self-conscious media event with unprecedented fanfare engineered by the network, *Testament,* picked up from PBS by Paramount Pictures, has come and gone as quietly as the proverbial fog on cat's paws. Perhaps it's merely a case of having been drowned in the deluge of the stay-at-home attraction, but whatever the explanation, Littman's is in every way superior to ABC's effort.

Testament is based on Carol Amen's short story, "The Last Testament" (*Ms.,* August, 1981). Littman's interpretation is spare—almost painfully so—even in its occasional embellishments of the original, despite some inserts of heavy-handed symbolism. The small, outer-suburban town of Hamlin in northern California is fifty miles or so from



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Ground Zero, where nuclear blasts apparently level the major urban centers along the coast and elsewhere. Few details of the attack are offered: it is merely an extraordinary event in the lives of ordinary people. The viewer is not subjected to the firestorms, vaporized bodies and massive destruction depicted in *The Day After.* Nor must one endure the riveting horror of our own first-strike Minutemen missiles ripping out of their launch silos, the one scene from *The Day After* that wrenched my guts and left a dreadful foreboding that grips me still.

Testament focuses on a particular family in Hamlin, especially the mother of that family, Carol Wetherly (Jane Alexander, who has been mentioned as a likely Oscar nominee for this role). Carol's husband, whom we met briefly in typical family scenes before the disaster, was in San Francisco at the time of the blast, and presumably killed. Carol and her three children are home watching television when the blast occurs. An hysterical male newscaster comes on the screen and cries out, "Ladies and gentlemen, this is not a joke. We are being attacked." Static, the screen goes blank, blinding yellow flash from outside, and it is done. The next scene is of bewildered townspeople in the street, not quite clear what has happened, not realizing that everything they have and know will soon flicker and die. The rest of the film is this flickering and dying, a long, painful ache as we watch order disintegrate, living things wilt, people—including Carol's children—die.

But the film is scrupulously restrained in the telling of this gruesome tale. It deceives the viewer with its layers of complexities and social implications beneath the spare exterior. Littman pursues a certain starkness of style that seems almost cruel, purposely frustrating the viewer's preconceived notions of the ugly, chaotic, graceless aftermath of nuclear holocaust. She succeeds in preventing the voyeurism typical of horrible human suffering by refusing to permit us to witness that suffering directly. Instead of tending to the victims of radiation sickness or assisting at deathbeds or even enduring the difficulties of getting enough food and water to survive, we are treated to a last conversation between Carol and her preteen daughter about making love: "What's it like? —And don't play mother with me." "That's what I am . . . you make love and you feel like the same body. You have this space and that person fills it up . . . there can be this gift, this making of miracles—*you.*" "Not for me." When next we see the daughter, her mother is stitching her up in a body-bag of old sheets. There is the school play of the Pied Piper, in which Carol's youngest son delivers the final line to the king: "Your children are not dead. They are only waiting until the earth deserves them." There are frequent family flashbacks from old home movies, a view of paradise lost, and Alexander's 12-year-old son putting on an old Beatles tape ("All My Lovin'"), dancing with his mom. One doesn't quite realize when one's tears actually begin during this movie; only that afterwards, the smallest reminders of it bring it all back in a rush.

Littman has her heroine pose all the important issues for us in ways so subtle I found my deepening sadness mitigated somewhat by gratitude. The opening scenes of *Testament* imply a family with more than its share of tensions originating from a social order in which male dominance is presumed. Tom Wetherly (played by William Devane) is both a trial and a blessing to his spouse and children, as he imposes his own interests and abilities on his usually less-than-willing family. I felt a peculiar and exacting feminist perspective present in this family portrait, which both annoyed me and satisfied me. It was, after all, I reasoned, a woman's view of family life, and utterly accurate, whatever my personal objections to family arrangements of this sort. The real point is that here is one of those rare films that lends an atypical look at a typical situation, and does so without harshness or overstatement.

Again, with sympathetic subtlety, Littman has the traditional dependents of society—the old, the foreign, the retarded, the children, the women—emerge as the calm keepers of life and order after the disaster. And she has the traditional bulwarks of society—the chief of police, the parish priest, the businessmen —succumb first to despair, weakness, death. It is tempting to compare these aspects of *Testament* with *The Day After,* to consider that the difference is attributable to a female versus male approach to the same problem. *Testament*'s content is wholly emotional and

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personal, the politics of nuclear war deriving from the human response to its occurrence—while *The Day After* is presented within a framework of international political events leading to a major nuclear exchange, the human response to which seems more an afterthought than the point of the story.

Toward the end of *Testament,* Carol stands stoically in front of a huge bonfire of burning bodies, the dead now too numerous to be buried by the steadily weakening last survivors. Brad, her last child still living, approaches quietly with news that another dear friend has died. After he leaves, she permits herself the luxury of despair, sinking to the ground sobbing, "Who did this? God *damn* you, who did this?" Of course, the question is posed for rhetorical purposes only. The obvious point is—and this is the greatest similarity between the two movies—that after it's happened, it doesn't matter at all who did it, only that it happened at all.

The power of *Testament* as a film is in the studied calm of its delivery of an intensely emotional message. In fact, I found myself objecting to the unnatural calm with which Carol seems to accept the deaths of her children. But the event itself is an overwhelmingly unnatural one, that final act of destruction that most of us still insist *can't happen.* The last scene is Brad's 13th birthday party, lone little candles stuck bravely with honey on small graham cracker squares. His mother tells him to make a wish. Gazing back with a tragic wisdom acquired from the reality and resignation of the numbing finality they all face, Brad simply asks, "What do I wish for, mom . . . ?"

Indeed, what does one wish for when it's all over and there's nothing left but to endure the slow end?

Littman's art, probably learned from her previous documentary work, is in delivering a message of utter gloom in a non-exploitative, non-sensational but realistically heartbreaking way. It seems clear that nuclear war is not survivable. But even in a film that portrays human extinction, Littman shows us that understatement can be a surprisingly dramatic and effective strategy.

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MURDER PSALM

America's premier avant-garde filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, has come under attack recently.[1] The reasons are myriad, frequently glib, and come from varying sectors of the film community, forming part of a larger criticism of the "old" American avant garde. As the grandest of that tradition and as a productive film-maker still, Brakhage is an easy target. He staunchly asserts his individual, poetical, often abstract sensibility at a time when a whole generation of younger film-makers are wrestling with his eminence, resuscitating narrative film form, collapsing art and politics, and rejecting what they see as the limitations of their major predecessors. The attack on Brakhage is symptomatic of a crisis in American avant-garde film-making brewing for the last ten years. The *raison d'être* of the personal, poetic, formal—that is avant-garde—cinema is in question. Weaned on the films of Brakhage, Kubelka, Jacobs, and the like, the hundreds of film-makers who have poured out of art schools and colleges since the late sixties confront their own maturity as artists at a time when there is no clear pantheon to replace the old and no new direction that is as compelling as the non-narrative cinema was in the formative years of the older generation of avant-garde film-makers. And as is frequently the case, the aspiration for new aesthetics, new masterworks, new personalities, turns back on itself in these times to form a critique of old aesthetics, a rejection of the notion of masterworks, and an attack on the previous figures of public recognition. Brakhage suffers the brunt of this reaction.

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America's premier avant-garde filmmaker, Stan Brakhage, has come under attack recently.[1] The reasons are myriad, frequently glib, and come from varying sectors of the film community, forming part of a larger criticism of the "old" American avant garde. As the grandest of that tradition and as a productive film-maker still, Brakhage is an easy target. He staunchly asserts his individual, poetical, often abstract sensibility at a time when a whole generation of younger film-makers are wrestling with his eminence, resuscitating narrative film form, collapsing art and politics, and rejecting what they see as the limitations of their major predecessors. The attack on Brakhage is symptomatic of a crisis in American avant-garde film-making brewing for the last ten years. The *raison d'être* of the personal, poetic, formal—that is avant-garde—cinema is in question. Weaned on the films of Brakhage, Kubelka, Jacobs, and the like, the hundreds of film-makers who have poured out of art schools and colleges since the late sixties confront their own maturity as artists at a time when there is no clear pantheon to replace the old and no new direction that is as compelling as the non-narrative cinema was in the formative years of the older generation of avant-garde film-makers. And as is frequently the case, the aspiration for new aesthetics, new masterworks, new personalities, turns back on itself in these times to form a critique of old aesthetics, a rejection of the notion of masterworks, and an attack on the previous figures of public recognition. Brakhage suffers the brunt of this reaction.

One of the symptoms of the current aesthetic upheaval is the renewal of the compilation film as a rich field for experimentation. Certainly "found footage" films are particular neither to this time nor to the "new" avant

garde. Jay Leyda in his *Films Beget Films* outlines the vast use that has been made of pre-shot footage in the history of film. And too, avant-garde film-makers Joseph Cornell and Bruce Conner developed their own film styles largely with the use of "found footage." But in the past five or more years, the genre has opened up to many film-makers, seeking in "found footage" editing a release from what was seen as the claustrophobic narcissism plaguing the followers of Brakhage's lyrical and diaristic sensibility. Heather McAdams, Alan Berliner, Esther Shatavsky, Dan Eisenberg—to name only a few—have expanded compilation film-making in strikingly original ways. To see, then, that Brakhage has also worked this form anew poses a question or two. Why does he choose this form? To what crisis is *he* responding? Unlike that of many of the recent "found footage" film-makers, Brakhage's motivation is largely consistent with his past work. For many of the "new" avant-garde, the "Self" that so motivated their precedessors seems insufficient for film form, and the inherent social content of found footage overcomes that lack. For Brakhage, found footage is simply another aspect of that aesthetic and historical Self. *Murder Psalm* represents a departure for Brakhage from what we think of as his style. Yet it is one responsive to the movement of his life, as all his films are. *Murder Psalm* presents a new crisis for Brakhage. In so doing, it assumes within it the larger upheaval which surrounds him.

This is not a new situation in Brakhage's career. During the mid-sixties he came under attack, as did many personal film-makers, for the "irrelevance" of his aesthetics in a time of social upheaval—the Vietnam War era. What might be called his response was *23rd Psalm Branch*—an essay on the personal and the political which inverts the conventional figuration of that formula. It poses political events as present and important only insofar as they are filtered through the individual. The crisis of the war in Vietnam is interpreted as a personal crisis in this film. It is interesting, then, that the film that most closely resembles *23rd Psalm Branch* should come during this period in Brakhage's career and this era in the history of the American avant-garde.

A number of issues have arisen for Brakhage since the making of *23rd Psalm Branch* which redirect his filmic endeavor. Certainly one of the most critical in the mid-seventies was his search for his natural parents. For Brakhage was an adopted child who, until then, had concentrated his familial energies on engendering children of his own. Letters of inquiry, reports of false leads, interviews testify to Brakhage's unsuccessful search for parents and siblings. His turn back in mid-life to seek his "real" progenitors represents the climax of an obsession which had hitherto been latent in his films and writing. That latent material forms a backdrop for *Murder Psalm*.

Brakhage's aesthetic language has frequently pointed to his obsession, as have a number of his films. There is a key metaphor, most directly alluded to in the film entitled *Blue Moses*. In *Metaphors on Vision,* Brakhage had described *himself* as a possible Moses.

> The natural mystery of my own origins, as I was adopted, had kept both the father and mother images nebulous enough that childhood imaginings (his majesty in exile, bastard son of an international whore, found floating in a basket among the barges on the Mississippi River creature of another planet, etc.) could project themselves into the immediate present and continue a' sending. I always tend to identify with the father of *Totem and Taboo,* especially when his stature became fully developed in *Moses and Monotheism.*[2]

In the Bible, Moses was a conduit between God and man. The Ten Commandments were given to Moses to pass on to the Israelites. The mediation ascribed to Moses is exactly what Brakhage has claimed for himself as film-makers. Substituting "the Muse" or "Inner Vision" (Brakhage's description of what inspires his work) for God, he frequently says his films are "given to" him to make, thus making a Romantic version of a prophetic tradition. As Moses's role was to give form to the Commandments, so Brakhage claims: "I BECOME INSTRUMENT FOR THE PASSAGE OF INNER VISION, THRU ALL MY SENSIBILITIES, INTO ITS EXTERNAL FORM."[3]

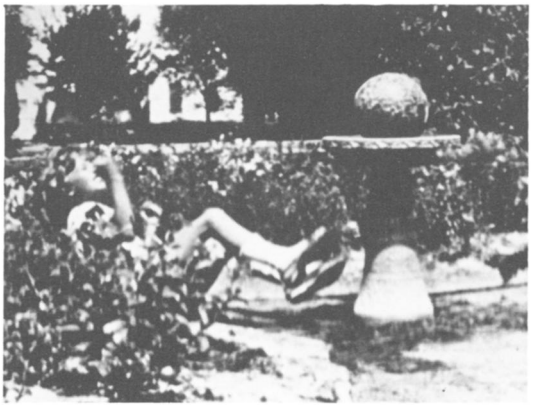
There is an inevitable relationship between Brakhage's film and his children, both spoken of in his film language as "given to" him. The Moses connection becomes even more apparent when one considers his attitude toward his children. By disavowing ownership, by not

creating them but receiving them, he puts them in exactly his own position as a child. As he was "given to" his foster parents, so his children were given to him. In view of the large portion of Brakhage's *œuvre* devoted to films about his children, one can look fruitfully at *Murder Psalm,* another film incorporating children, to see how it reformulates the equations Brakhage = children = films.

Brakhage describes the impulse to make *Murder Psalm* as coming from a nightmare he had of murdering his mother.[4] The film is silent, and Brakhage treats the found footage in ways reminiscent of his own films of the sixties. He bleached, patterned, and otherwise gave the photographic imagery a painterly overlay. The texture ranges from a thick pattern that recalls *Oh Life—A Woe Story—The A Test News,* to a thin tint, like some of the early *Songs.* He also uses negative, solarized-looking footage. In combination, the texture of the film is rich and very varied. The different footage, for the most part, is very rapidly cut. The most striking imagery comes from an educational film on epilepsy, and Brakhage's film is structured around that preexisting narrative. There is a girl seen in various settings: in a yard gazing into a bird-bath, into which a bright red ball is thrown; as a rider in a car; as the subject of a medical examination; as a figure contemplating herself before a mirror, and, through a cinematic dissolve, growing into a mature version of herself. Also included in this film is a doctor who seems to explain the cerebral disfunction which causes her epilepsy.

In a parallel narrative to the saga of the modern girl, is the flight of a small hooded girl through a forest. She is also epileptic. The footage of the forest is in a lightly tinted black and white, and at first it appears to be from a totally different film. The girl looks like Little Red Riding Hood, running to her Grandmother (and the wolf). Since Brakhage is an avid and sophisticated reader of fairy tales, the implications of the image would not be lost on him. The poetics of *Murder Psalm* bind those implications tightly into the whole of the film.

Besides the medical film, old movies of pioneers moving in covered wagons, Civil War battles, national heroes (Lincoln in particular) are used, often in negative and bleached or painted. Some of the material may have been refilmed from television. A cartoon of a mouse-as-policeman running furiously forward, swinging his nightstick, alternately avoiding and having collisions, is intercut throughout the film. And footage of an autopsy, from the material out of which Brakhage's *The Act of Seeing with One's Own Eyes* was made, is also included. There are other shots in the film, but these make up the central image sources.



Within the first few minutes, *Murder Psalm* lays out the themes which will be developed and restated as the film progresses. A rich orange color followed by a thick, colorful abstraction establishes the film material (celluloid and emulsion) as a fundamental prerequisite to the image. Within the scope of Brakhage's work, the color orange is a sign of a cinematic flare, light directly striking the film emulsion at the beginning and end of a roll. While sometimes related to fire imagery, orange normally affirms the film's filmicness. The mold or paint which follows seems very much in the spirit of *23rd Psalm Branch,* in

which Brakhage found it necessary to point out that the most moving wartime imagery was presented *through* the media of film and television. By reaffirming the filmic surface, Brakhage forces the acknowledgment of representation as (at least) once removed from reality, a product as much of the medium as the image source. This distance will be increased by degrees as the film moves into black and white, and negative, and with the use of imagery from earlier Brakhage films.

The first shot of a girl in the film follows immediately an image of a bright red ball. While the girl herself appears in many situations throughout the film, the crucial events occur when she comes into contact with this ball. She has a fit. Moreover, the subject of the film becomes more and more motivated as hemispherical imagery makes historical, political, and biological connections between different film material. Brakhage makes visual relationships between the ball, water in the birdbath, the girl's hand, a scale model of the brain, a half of a wagon wheel, a covered wagon, and a semicircular tunnel. Circular imagery is cut in half by the frame to make semicircles or hemispheres. The material about epilepsy is transformed into a meditation on the social and cultural circumstances of childhood trauma via a visual string of semicircular imagery. By substituting one image for another—e.g., the model of the brain for the covered wagon—Brakhage links their meanings and implication. The girl's seizure is made part of the social organism through visual rhyme.

Travel is one motif in *Murder Psalm*. The hooded girl wanders through the forest. The covered wagons move, presumably, westward. Sometimes they form a circle for protection. A car travels down a main street in a town. At times we catch glimpses of the girl in the front seat. She passes store windows. As the car slowly passes, the words in the windows offer clues to the film's meaning. They are significant despite the fact that they have been randomly encountered. "Life" becomes "If" as the camera frames the word obliquely. "Maternity" becomes "Mater" and then Mate." It is as if traveling through life, the girl encounters sexuality in the form of pregnancy ("Maternity"), motherhood ("Mater"), and the *double entendre* of husband ("Mate") or copulation (Mate!). Immediately after this shot, images of an open skull and cartoon explosion occur. The reference to sex is thus linked with death.

This is not a new equation for Brakhage who had pointed out the phallic nature of war in the making of *23rd Psalm Branch*. But it is interesting to see it at this point in Brakhage's career, in that childhood is included in the equation. He recognizes the Freudian position that in the mind of the child sex and death are bound together because of children's misinterpretation of sexual acts as violent assaults.

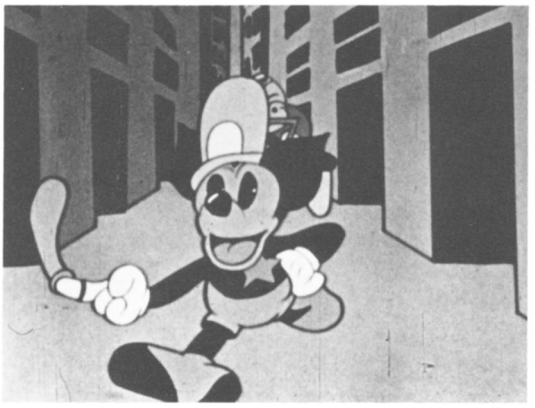
The highely mediated footage in *Murder Psalm*—historical drama, instructional/medical film—take on the burden of psychological reality when placed next to the documentary footage of a charred or dissected body. The central figure of the child makes these cinematic juxtapositions seem horrific. The girl is often seen near water, and shots of her are often intercut with fire imagery. Both water and fire imagery are interrupted by explosions. The bursts are like punctuation in the film, drawing our attention to the theme of trauma. The birdbath is the central image of water. A stream to which the Red Riding Hood figure walks is another powerful image. With explosions, including the sudden burst when the red ball is thrown into the water, there are often very brief images of fire or orange flare-like imagery. But the most shocking form this fire imagery takes is, by implication, in a shot of a charred body—a child perhaps—intercut with the two different girls who fall when in epileptic shock. The images of seizure seem extremely violent in this context. In one case the seizure is "caused" by the red ball thrown at the girl. In the other it is "caused" by a bolt of lightning. The water is inextricably linked with the fire.[5] One recognizes that this film favors violent relationships between imagery.

The course of *Murder Psalm* is loosely narrative. Its story climaxes with each girl's seizure. But consistent with Brakhage's world view, this is not a simple story. Rather a speculative union of social/cultural, natural and biological phenomena is made to cause the child's catharsis. And other visual events seem to be caused by it. If each one is looked at thematically, a pattern can be discerned with

which Brakhage makes his case—a case very similar to that made in *23rd Palm Branch.*

The historical material centers around American social mythology. Pioneers, fathers-of-the-country, cowboys, and foot soldiers are shown. Some of the imagery comes from movies; some is taken from television. To anyone familiar with Brakhage's work, this immediately makes the material suspect, since Brakhage consistently rails against commercial film (and his own participation in it as a young man as a maker of "commercials"). There is a repeated linkage of all of the dramatic material to images of death. From the opening sequence of a cowboy looking off screen and a body being carried on a stretcher, one can sense that for Brakhage the American heritage is ultimately tied to war and death. The historical interrelation among wars had been established in *23rd Psalm Branch,* by Brakhage's inability to conceive of the Vietnam War in terms other than the war of his childhood, World War II. Here, the issue is traced even further, linking notions of American patriotism and history with the death they spread. Representing recent political life is Hubert Humphrey; the past, Washington and Lincoln. Because of the negative stock and patterned overlay, even the covered wagons (those vehicles traditionally carrying heroic settlers west to populate the United States) look like tombstones. A television image of Christ is followed by one of Abraham Lincoln. That sequence makes clear some of the larger relationships in the film. We see Christ, dressed in a robe. Then we see the hooded girl walking through the woods. There is a shot of Lincoln looking out of the frame and then one of a woman at a desk, perhaps the girl grown up. Finally, there is a shot of a battle, which looks like recent war footage filmed from television. The line of thought which links the Christ figure with the girl because of their dress, and also with Lincoln, a "savior" of the United States, is critical of what has been done in the name of both God and country. The girl is a witness and the victim.

Historical meditation becomes social comment in *Murder Psalm.* The cartoon of a mouse-as-policeman careening forward is integrated into the rest of the film material in a number of ways. The mouse's club is shaped



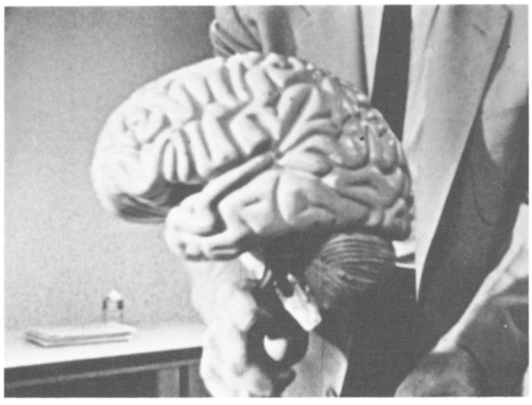
like a penis and at one point is placed like the penis of the cadaver in the autopsy footage. Again, Brakhage is pointing out the phallic nature of violence in general. The city the mouse runs through recedes in a fashion very much like that the girl is driven through. Perspective is maintained and buildings are slowly passed. But no landscape is merely itself in *Murder Psalm.* By giving the cartoon and the filmed city similar characteristics, Brakhage makes the city and the car threatening and ominous. The mouse is "killed" many times, and so the girl might be. Negative images of car headlights, black dots on white light, reinforce the threat. Yet the natural landscape is also troubling. The hooded girl runs through the woods, often immediately preceded or followed by the mouse running through the city. As we watch her flee, so we see soldiers burrow through a jungle. Both the city and the country portend danger. The natural and manmade landscapes are equally part of the burden of social man.

Travel through space is only one of the kinds of change Brakhage explores in *Murder Psalm.* Time, or more specifically growth, is also a concern. Brakhage leaves in this film dissolves from the original film on epilepsy, showing the young girl's transformation into a young woman. But the implicitly optimistic content of the dissolve is not maintained. One has the sense that in the original, the dissolve meant that while in the past an epileptic child would be isolated and abandoned to suffer the consequence of a seizure, in the present, with enlightened medical practices, a child could grow up to be an attractive, well-integrated adult. Brakhage, however, subverts this optimism by cutting to the image of a charred baby immediately after the dissolve. Further,

he presents the same girl's face looking into a pool of water as if in contemplation; and then a shot of combat soldiers, and, ironically, a couple, out of focus, kissing. As with the sign written "Maternity-Mate," the future here, indicated by the adult version of the girl and the embrace, seems violent because of the war footage. The life of this person is contextualized in an ominous forward looking image.

Brakhage's editing frequently implies the inherent violence of sexuality. He makes the same case for play. Again, he uses footage of war to make his point. A boy throws the red ball at the girl by the birdbath. The water splashes her. He laughs. She grimaces. Brakhage does not leave us to meditate on the meaning of this cruelty, nor on her response. He cuts to a battle scene and then again to the girl, who falls backward, as if wounded. The childish cruelty of the boy is equated with that of grown counterparts, with all of the horror reflected back on him.

Hemispherical shapes like the wagon wheel and covered wagons are continually rhymed with the scale model of the brain. But the shape and texture of the brain is also rhymed with the cloud formations—in cartoons and in the other, more realistic footage. Brakhage



is not content just to make a social context for the child. The natural and biological are given equal weight as determinants, and the particular social history of America is expanded to include both internal biological functions and larger forces. A cartoon figure of a man is shown sweating profusely, drops of sweat appearing from his head. The next shot is of the stream to which the hooded girl runs. The evident relationship is one of cause: the drops of sweat (from the head, site of the brain which we have seen to be the "cause" of epilepsy) created the stream. And reverse relationships are also made. When the hooded girl runs through raindrops and a flash of light causes her to fall in a fit, Brakhage cuts in a shot of the cartoon mouse charred black and then the horrible image of the charred body. The potential destructive power of light is hyperbolized.

The biological metaphor is expanded through the gestures Brakhage has used in his films for more than twenty years. The pattern of the ball, negative-stock image of the headlights, water patterns reflected on the girl's face, are all equated through juxtaposition with film grain. The surface of what we see becomes the surface through which we see in this film about, among other things, our moving-picture heritage.

The girl reminds one of the children in Brakhage's other films, his own children. The Red Riding Hood figure brings to mind the Brakhage children dressed in capes in *Scenes from Under Childhood* and *The Animals of Eden and After*. In the first film, they are costumed deliberately, as for a fairy tale. In the second, they are only loosely in costume, out for a walk with their mother. The girl by the birdbath at one point recoils from sparklers, just as the children at the end of *23rd Psalm Branch* reenact war through their play with sparklers.[6] But it is in the image of the red ball that *Murder Psalm* draws its closest parallels to the rest of the Brakhage canon. In *Song IV,* child's play with the ball signals an inherent relationship to the world—to space, gravity, shape, and time. In many of his early films the ball had been an object of play and discovery, and a metaphor. Through the image of the ball, Brakhage as film-maker could "play" with the measures of experience as a child would: cutting the film when the ball left the frame to make it disappear. He made a metaphor of the ball, as astral body or atom (*Dog Star Man*); in *Song IV* he filled the screen with the ball to present its surface as the equivalent of film grain and luminescence; and he made it weightless in reference to the edge of the frame. In all, Brakhage could equate himself with the child in his manipulation of the ball. In *Murder Psalm,* however, the ball carries menacing overtones. It is not only an

object of contemplation and play but a weapon. In making this point, Brakhage develops a theme that had begun to appear in earlier films, i.e., that child's play at war games are both causes and effects of war. In Brakhage's earlier film, boys and guns had been used to make this point. Here, the lives of children, color, and gesture are inherently violent. Personal violence is equated with major social/historical violence as the child is swept up into the culture.

The epileptic child in *Murder Psalm* is the only figure with a modicum of sensitivity to the horror around her. When the doctor waves his arm and, immediately after, soldiers fire rifles, she goes into shock. She falls repeatedly, responding to the natural, social historical, and biological world while others (like the perpetually resurrected mouse) continue unabated. She reveals her sensibility through shock. That Brakhage finds in physical disease a sociopsychological root is no surprise. Brakhage considers his own childhood asthma to have contributed to his becoming an artist by isolating him, keeping him inactive, forcing him to read and think in solitude. Asthma, like epilepsy has been identified as "possession" in many cultures, a concept intriguing to Brakhage who very early in his artistic career associated his own notions of revelation with Maya Deren's of possession. Deren's *Divine Horsemen* and footage of Haitian ritual possession were extremely interesting to Brakhage. Further he drew parallels between possession and epilepsy by their physical appearance. The film documents of epileptic seizure in the Library of Congress, shown to Brakhage by Hollis Frampton in the early seventies, fascinated him. He saw in them evidence, not of the clinical symptoms which they were made to illustrate, but a kind of demonism and rage.[7] In this analysis of *Murder Psalm,* the notion of rage is particularly important.

The "Psalm" in the title recalls Brakhage's earlier *Songs.* The *Songs* bear a very loose relationship to the biblical Psalms. Their lyricism and, in *23rd Psalm Branch,* historical meditation, are similar. The notion of prayer and supplication in the form of a song (or written poem) appealed to Brakhage's sense of one of the uses of poetic film. *Murder Psalm* comes more than fifteen years after the making of the *Songs;* while maintaining the sense of personal "singing out" of a theme, it is much less lyrical and much more a meditation on a particular Psalm. The most violent, threatening Psalm, 137, ends in contemplatior of murderous revenge. I quote it here because a number of images in the film are more easily understood in its context. Significantly, it is the murder of children the psalm invokes.

> By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion.
>
> We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion.
>
> How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land? If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.
>
> If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy.
>
> Remember, O Lord, the children of E-dom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof.
>
> O daughters of Babylon, who are to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us.
>
> Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.

Murder Psalm bears a number of very direct relations to Psalm 137. The image of the river as the site of meditation and lamentation informs the film's image of the girl by the stream. Flight, travel, captivity, and the "strange land" are all depicted in the incessant movement of the film. The image of people carrying their possessions in covered wagons, driving, fleeing through the forest all coincide with the themes of the psalm. The film maintains the angry spirit of the psalm, but is directed at our own history and present.

The figure of the child is the vehicle for the violence against one's own heritage. The child suffers from history, play-acts it, and will repeat it as an adult. The continuity of life, from child to adult, country to city, nature to artifice insures that those that "dasheth thy little ones against the stones" are only manifestations of the "little ones" themselves. Society insures the continuity by formulating patterns that are mimicked from nature and the human body. History ensures it equally. The pessimism of the psalm is doubled in the film, which depicts a culture which dashes its own little ones against the stones, or teaches

them to dash themselves. Brakhage offers no alternative. Instead he poses this as a cosmic truth, revealed through film documents of our culture. In combination with Psalm 137, the Red Riding Hood myth reinforces the looming violence of the film and points to an undercurrent that is sexual in nature. Bruno Bettelheim's *The Uses of Enchantment* is useful in interpreting the fairy tale. *Murder Psalm* emphasizes some of the same issues that Bettelheim discusses. His work is helpful in deciphering the figure of the hooded girl in the film.

Bettelheim interprets Red Riding Hood as wanting her grandmother's destruction. By giving the world explicit directions to grandmother's house, she gets out of an anxiety-provoking situation herself and endangers her grandmother. Bettelheim sees the release of the child's tension and the violence toward the elder as important in the tale. It is a psychological truth that children do sometimes actively seek to destroy their parents (here, grandparents). By giving the wolf directions to grandmother's, she must encounter the anxiety-provoking figure of the wolf again. According to Bettelheim, he is made up of equal parts of sex and death. He is in bed, she joins him and he wants to eat her up. She is tricked by the wolf just as her grandmother had been before her.[8] The relevant part of Bettelheim's analysis for *Murder Psalm* is the equation of sex and death and the death-wish toward one's parents since both *are* aspects of Brakhage's film.

By using the Psalms for his title and by publicly announcing the origin of the film as a nightmare of murdering his mother, Brakhage directs our inquiry into the film in specific ways. *Murder Psalm* is a film made when most of his children are grown. By the time of *Murder Psalm,* Brakhage's interest in child observation had waned. No longer does he have their presence before him, to carry the burden of his self-discovery through his observation of their own. He can now see the result of his own childrearing. His children were raised according to an ethos radically different from that under which he grew up. The rage of the film seems to be an outgrowth of his inability as a parent to break the cycle of sociocultural heritage and convention. The rage is directed against his mother who taught him the conventions he despises.

In the Psalms, the song of Zion is substantially different from the song of Babylon, because it is the song of a people exiled, living in alienation. Brakhage is not concerned with literal, physical distance. Instead, Brakhage is preoccupied with the "distance" between art and society. His alienation is that of an artist. The issue is how one can "sing the songs of Zion" with the tools of commercial film, the found footage with which he works. By drawing on all of his skill as a film-maker —using painting, solarizing, and complex editing techniques to heighten our attention to the deliberate flow of images—Brakhage transforms the conventional "found" footage. He recontextualizes it on *his* terms. Even the fairy tale is stripped of its mystery. It is in this way that one can differentiate Brakhage's work from that of many younger found-footage filmmakers. While they seek to reveal the avant-garde film as latent in the commercial film, Brakhage subsumes that vast moving-picture heritage, as he does every other subject he engages, in his own filmic endeavor.

Murder Psalm reflects a crisis in Brakhage's film-making. His interest in the notion of seizure, his thoroughgoing disparagement of American history as a continual drive toward death, his equal disdain for the products of the film and television industries, are the culmination of a number of strains of Brakhage's film-making since *Anticipation of the Night.* But the key elements of rage and matricide are new. By 1980, Brakhage is witness to the maturity and integration into the culture of his own children. He has lost their physical presence to the society he wrestled with over his entire career as a film-maker. He is forced to use images of children from commercial film. The contemplation of images other than his own family's is problematic for Brakhage, a film-maker who perpetually sees himself in the people he films. The rage evinced by *Murder Psalm* is partly an outgrowth of his new, familyless situation.

That the film and its rage are directed against his mother is understandable from the point of view of an adopted child. It is possible that Brakhage regarded her as having saved him from complete abandonment as a boy. On the other hand, it is equally possible

(and psychologically documented in Freud's analysis of "the family romance") that he felt she stole him from his real parents. Psalm 137 tells of the Jews in Babylon "carried away captive" from their homeland. Their rage is against their captors. Brakhage's is against his captor, his mother.

The basic issue becomes clearer in light of this reading of *Murder Psalm*. One of the ways in which an adopted child can come to grips with the world is to separate "nature" from "nurture," since the separation is a fundamental condition of his life. His concept of self can remain distinct from the concept of society. The continuity of parent-self and society is broken since his natural parents did not raise him. His adopted parents are complicit with the social order since they introduced him to it and instilled its values in him. In *Murder Psalm* Brakhage's desire to kill his mother is hinted at in the use of the Red Riding Hood figure, but is expressed in the violence of the edited found footage.

Simultaneously, the film reinvents a relationship between nature and nurture based on filmic principles. The intercutting of internal body parts, with images of the child and all of the other found footage creates a continuity that is Brakhage's own. Nevertheless, it remains highly alienated from the values of the social order the film depicts. Brakhage's antithetical stance to the original film material results in his alienating picture. There is no love lost between them.

That Brakhage made this film in 1980 and presented it to the avant-garde film community is a sign of the continuing unorthodoxy of his artistic career. At a time when it is suspect to invest one's aesthetic in family life, Brakhage continues to propose the family as a crucial social organism. Further, he does so from a perspective steeped in Freudian analysis. He is not troubled by his identification with a female child, nor by the acknowledgement of the indivisibility of sex and violence—two issues which are the subject of endless numbers of recent avant-garde films. He stands iconoclastically outside current political and narrative fashion and speaks through his films with authenticity and the authority he has accumulated over twenty years of filmmaking. It is no wonder he is besieged. While *Murder Psalm* addresses many of the same concerns that are in the air in avant-garde film discourse these days, it does so in a thoroughly Brakhagian voice. —MARJORIE KELLER

NOTES

1. I cite as examples two instances from the San Francisco Bay Area. The first occurred on the occasions of Brakhage's 50th birthday. The "Emergency Filmmakers" (an organization which came into being in opposition to the San Francisco Cinémathèque) sponsored a "Brakhage Dance Party" at which Brakhage's silent films were shown as a kind of light show accompanied by rock 'n roll music. It was a gesture calculated to irritate purists of silent and/or abstract film. The second occurred in May, 1983, at a panel discussion sponsored by 80 Langton St. entitled "Does the Avant-Garde Film Still Exist?" Film critic Jonathan Rosenbaum took the occasion to write off Brakhage as a significant force in the contemporary avant garde. In his wards ". . . one has to contend with a perpetually unquestioned embrace of the familial, patriarchal and phallocratic side of his work and the reactionary political stance that inevitably derives from it . . ." These are but two examples of an ongoing criticism of Brakhage's position.
2. Stan Brakhage, *Metaphors on Vision* (New York: Film Culture, 1963), p. 64. The pages of this book are not numbered. My system begins on the first page of the interview, after the introduction.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
4. Brakhage. Millennium Lecture, New York, March 27, 1981.
5. Brakhage had used this conjunction before, most explicitly in *Fire of Waters* (1965).
6. There is disagreement about the meaning of this image in *23rd Psalm Branch*. See Sitney, *VIsionary Film*, n. 24, "Major Mythopoeia," pp. 450–451.
7. His interest in these matters became evident to me as a student of Brakhage's at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in 1971–73. It was conveyed in screenings, lectures, and reading assignments.
8. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Uses of Enchantment* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), pp. 166–183.

THE TRAGEDY OF A RIDICULOUS MAN

Director: Bernardo Bertolucci. Script: Bertolucci. Photography: Carlo di Palma. Music: Ennio Morricone. Ladd Co. (Warners).

The Tragedy of a Ridiculous Man, upon first viewing, provides an oblique and perplexing experience. The film was booed and hissed at Cannes and has been described as the "least pleasurable" and "least successful" of Bertolucci's works.[1] However, for anyone concerned with the further development of Bertolucci's canon and the issue of identity and antagonism between father and son that he has raised in each of his films, it holds a splendid fascination. Here, as in *The Spider's Stratagem* (1969), he makes the father/son dilemma central. What is new in *The Tragedy*

(and psychologically documented in Freud's analysis of "the family romance") that he felt she stole him from his real parents. Psalm 137 tells of the Jews in Babylon "carried away captive" from their homeland. Their rage is against their captors. Brakhage's is against his captor, his mother.

The basic issue becomes clearer in light of this reading of *Murder Psalm*. One of the ways in which an adopted child can come to grips with the world is to separate "nature" from "nurture," since the separation is a fundamental condition of his life. His concept of self can remain distinct from the concept of society. The continuity of parent-self and society is broken since his natural parents did not raise him. His adopted parents are complicit with the social order since they introduced him to it and instilled its values in him. In *Murder Psalm* Brakhage's desire to kill his mother is hinted at in the use of the Red Riding Hood figure, but is expressed in the violence of the edited found footage.

Simultaneously, the film reinvents a relationship between nature and nurture based on filmic principles. The intercutting of internal body parts, with images of the child and all of the other found footage creates a continuity that is Brakhage's own. Nevertheless, it remains highly alienated from the values of the social order the film depicts. Brakhage's antithetical stance to the original film material results in his alienating picture. There is no love lost between them.

That Brakhage made this film in 1980 and presented it to the avant-garde film community is a sign of the continuing unorthodoxy of his artistic career. At a time when it is suspect to invest one's aesthetic in family life, Brakhage continues to propose the family as a crucial social organism. Further, he does so from a perspective steeped in Freudian analysis. He is not troubled by his identification with a female child, nor by the acknowledgement of the indivisibility of sex and violence—two issues which are the subject of endless numbers of recent avant-garde films. He stands iconoclastically outside current political and narrative fashion and speaks through his films with authenticity and the authority he has accumulated over twenty years of filmmaking. It is no wonder he is besieged. While *Murder Psalm* addresses many of the same concerns that are in the air in avant-garde film discourse these days, it does so in a thoroughly Brakhagian voice. —MARJORIE KELLER

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of a Ridiculous Man is the maturation of Bertolucci's vision. For the first time the tale is told from the point of view of the father. The film's bivalent form, dreamwork masquerading as thriller, is filled in equal measure with mystery and awareness. Visually compelling as it is enigmatic, the riddle implores solution, but leaves the viewer off balance. In this respect, it is disturbing to the audience, and this disturbance of perception allows a new consciousness to emerge from an established genre.

The operating device of the conventional thriller is enigma. Certain details of the narrative are omitted in order to mystify the viewer. This is done with a particular end in view, a game plan incorporating a set of characters whose fate the viewer becomes engrossed in following to some final truth. Resolution is accomplished through the viewer's identification with a central character. In Bertolucci's film, it is precisely the denial of such an identity that has frustrated many viewers. The story is a complex dream-work woven around the oedipal drama of a middle-aged man experiencing self-doubt. In this respect his perspective is dispersed, at times becoming a dispassionate observer of the self, and again displacing his feelings onto others or transmuting them symbolically. Not only does the film lack a sympathetic character who serves as a guiding intelligence in leading the viewer to some ultimate truth, there is finally no truth to be found. Enigma becomes the film's answer as well as its question.

Primo Spaggiari (Ugo Tognazzi) is the owner of a Parmesan cheese factory. The film credits roll over a shot of him asleep at his desk, amid the debris of an office party. He wakes and begins to remember. "It was my birthday. We blew out the candles, we boozed it up . . ." He picks up two photographs given him by his employees, one of himself at 25, the other as he is today (about 50). The mirroring of young and old becomes a dynamic core around which the film revolves. The story is revealed through the eyes of the older man, while the son provides a structuring absence, a blank mirror held up to the father, in which he sees himself as domineering, shrewd, vulnerable, self-aggrandising, and as he readily admits, ridiculous.

The narrative that follows takes the form of a thriller. Primo witnesses the kidnapping of his son, Giovanni (Riccardo Tognazzi), by men who appear to be terrorists. They demand money. Primo resists, but is tricked into paying the ransom by Giovanni's allies, who include his mother, Barbara (Anouk Aimée), his girlfriend, Laura (Laura Morante), and his comrade, Adelpho (Victor Cavallo). Political involvements are suggested. Ransom letters arrive in mysterious ways. Primo is spied upon; his home is searched by secret police. He is led to believe his son is dead and then alive. Plots and counterplots are hinted. The son returns, but why or how is never clear. We never learn who the abductors are, or why they chose Giovanni; whether he is an innocent victim or a co-conspirator, or whether any of the events have a logical and meaningful connection with one another.

Bertolucci confounds the usual processes of narrativity by using codes that question themselves. Unlike the traditional "enigma" film, which creates questions in order to resolve them within the text, this film uses the breaks in logic to provoke the viewer's perplexity and, in effect, to demand that the viewer create an alternative text in order to draw meaning from the events narrated. He does this by means of a coding of absurdity, which is defined and recognized by repeated incidents of comedic discord in an otherwise serious drama. Key junctures in the text take a surreal or ludicrous turn that breaks the narrative logic. In each instance this move diverts attention from the objective flow of events and suggests an alternative reading grounded in the subjective reality of a dream.

Primo is on the roof of his factory, where he has been playing ship's captain with his new cap and binoculars (a birthday gift from his son), when he spots Giovanni's car approaching. He continues to watch helplessly as the car is forced off the road and Giovanni is taken prisoner by hooded men. A worker whom Primo had spied earlier trimming branches from a tree now turns to confront the audience. This insert, juxtaposed to the abduction, functions as a displacement. The workers stands in for Primo's point of view, and acknowledges, through the exaggerated phallic destructiveness of the chainsaw, the father's wish to kill the son, a wish which has been mediated in reality by his having

Son, father, mother: TRAGEDY OF A RIDICULOUS MAN

been kidnapped rather than killed.

Another scene immediately following the abduction takes an absurd twist that once again shifts attention away from the plight of the son and focuses instead on the father's ambivalence. At the scene of the crash the police have arrived and are preparing to tow the car. Primo's wife, Barbara, stands apart from the others, framed in close-up and dramatically lit by blue light, her face anguished and accusing. She is clearly focused on avenging her son, but Primo stumbles from the side of the road, his hand to his heart. He complains of palpitations. The scene turns suddenly comic as the Marshall (Vittorio Caprioli) abandons his towing operation to take Primo's pulse—agreeing that he has rapid heartbeats and advising him to see a doctor if they persist. The palpitations foreground Primo's emotional state, and suggest vulnerability.

When isolated for analysis, these fragmentary comic instances or absurdities defy reading in terms of normal plot structure, but they may be seen contrapuntally to form a subtext which has the quality of a dream.

The loss of a loved one is a common type of dream expressing the wish, in Freudian terms, for that person's death. The death wish is not clear cut, but mediated in most cases by the censor, and transformed into feelings of ambivalence. Here the film revolves around the issue of whether the son is alive or dead.

> It very commonly happens that in dreams of this kind the dead person is treated to begin with as though he were alive, that he then suddenly turns out to be dead and that in a subsequent part of the dream he is alive once more. This has a confusing effect . . . It is intended to help the dreamer to repudiate his very intense and often contradictory emotional attitudes and it then becomes a dream representation of his ambivalence.[2]

Bertolucci explores that ambivalence from the point of view of the father. In the past his conflicts with the idealized father figure have led to an ultimate rejection.[3] The son attempts to avenge his father's death in *Spider's Stratagem,* and becomes trapped in the past as a result. In *The Conformist* the son escapes his father's insanity by becoming a Fascist, a greater insanity that leads him to self-destruction. Here, Bertolucci allows himself to enter into the conflict from the father's perspective and to let it move him toward a deeper understanding, without resort to violence or self-destruction. In this process he subverts the principal codes, not only of the "thriller," but also of the Oedipal conflict.

Traditionally understood, that conflict involves the repressed desire of the son to kill the father and to possess the mother. Bertolucci turns this inside out by making the mother representative of Primo's conscience as well as an expression of his nurturing potential, which is held in restraint in the position of wife, i.e., prevented from taking direct action in the world. Barbara can only argue with Primo and goad him to activity. Meanwhile, the son has been banished from the picture, leaving the father to deal exclusively with his own vague fears of those aspects of himself which his son represents and the implications of their absence or loss. Again and again Primo recalls his radical idealism, his way with women, his peasant beginnings, from which he has built an empire—his factory, his workers, his home, his family. Yet, as he confronts the circumstances of his loss, the power and prestige associated with these things seem to crumble around him.

Following the abduction, determined to ransom her son, Barbara stands in the factory taking an inventory of all Primo's capital holdings. The net worth of the father is the

price of the son. "Do you have what it takes?" she seems to be asking. Primo whines and begs her to relent. For him the loss of the son is weighted against the loss of his factory, his power and virility. Barbara is demanding something new of him; something that requires giving rather than acquiring. In a fit of desperation over losing his empire and his wife's affection, Primo embraces her passionately and asks, "Why did you marry me?"

"Because you worked harder than the others," she tells him. "Because you liked *things*."

Thus reassured, Primo is in charge again. He strides through the racks of cheese bathed in a yellow light. "I'll show you my Fort Knox. Here are my gold bars." They spend the night in the factory like young lovers, again deflecting the narrative thrust into a whimsical dream reality.

The incestuous tone of the conflict between Primo and Barbara sharpens considerably when she receives one of the several ransom notes from Giovanni. She asks Primo to read it aloud to her. The words are impetuously romantic, addressed to a "girl from Cherbourg who was called 'Impatience'" (the young Barbara whom Primo wooed and married). The note closes with a "hug for my dear 'Impatience,'" and Primo adds, wistfully, "a hug for Father too." The son is the competitor for Barbara's affections, yet the note echoes Primo's own romance with Barbara when they first became lovers, and his current crisis of inadequacy. On still another level, the sad voice that adds "a hug for Father too," seems to express a sense of loss in his relationship with his son. In this respect, Bertolucci breaks with the Freudian construction of the Oedipal conflict, i.e., the fear of the son's rivalry, to suggest that it is the loss of the son's affection that is painful, that there is a love between the father and the son which neither is able to express to the other. This aspect of the triangle emerges again when Primo visits the run-down shack where Giovanni's friend Adelpho lives. He exhibits contempt for the place. "I can't picture my son in a place like this . . . talking about life and love . . ." Inside, a wall covered with photographs of Adelpho and Giovanni together confronts him. They pose and smile like lovers, reflecting Primo's latent fears of what affection toward his son might imply about him.

Later he finds Giovanni's girl, Laura, in the house. She sits on the couch with a picture of Giovanni cradled in her arms. When Primo tries to comfort her, she resists. His gesture becomes sexual. He forces her down on the couch, but, when she responds, he turns away. She asks him to stay close; he complies, but seems troubled and reflective, threatened by her receptivity, ambivalent about showing affection for her as for his son. Each of these scenes questions the traditional reading of the Oedipal conflict by expanding subtly into other dimensions of the problem. Nonetheless, women remain the primary instruments of retribution in the conflict between father and son. Adelpho arrives on the scene and Laura wants to hear news of Giovanni. "Alive or dead?" she demands. Adelpho can't speak, thus implying the worst. She turns on Primo, who has resisted paying the ransom, holding a butcher knife. He stops her hand, but she stabs him with the information that Giovanni often talked of kidnapping him.

As female sex objects in Primo's mind both Laura and Barbara are castrating. It is they who wield the weapons in this film. Primo tries to be paternal and authoritative toward Laura. As she helps him forge a ransom note, the camera isolates her ear and hand. It pulls back however, when she asserts her womanhood (rivalling Barbara) by confronting his stare with her bare breasts. She challenges his insecurities and the macho attitude with which he masks them. When Barbara and Primo set out to pay the ransom, he carries a suitcase full of money and she carries a gun. She is hostile and accusing. When the pistol goes

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off, they are both stunned. He picks up a staff from the ground, and they continue along the path, appearing older as they move into the distance, linked by the phallus/staff.

At home Barbara mounts a sentinel on the roof, awaiting the return of their son. Primo becomes impatient now.

"Today's children are pale, with lifeless eyes," he tells her. "They are monsters."

She answers, "Giovanni is not pale; Giovanni is beautiful."

"Giovanni is dead," he tells her, as if to settle the matter.

"Who is the monster?" she asks, in effect turning the mirror on him.

The portrait of the father presented here is assuredly more monstrous than sublime, yet this impulse is constantly mediated by other aspects of his personality, both in his private life and in the world at large.

Adelpho is an important mediating figure between the private and the public world. Primo's private world is represented by his house, his wife, his family and in part by his factory. "Other manufacturers work with dead materials," he says. "Mine is alive. Milk flows out to nourish the family, and like the family it becomes solid." The factory is thus linked firmly with Primo's peasant origins as with the modern industrial world. Adelpho works for Primo and is therefore someone he can call upon as an ally in his plot to steal the ransom money for reinvestment in the factory, a move he justifies as helping his workers. Yet, Adelpho remains mysterious to him, and to the audience. He is introduced in one of the most bizarre and comic scenes in the film. As Primo leaves the bank, two large, white public address horns, mounted on an unseen vehicle, follow him along the narrow street. Their shape recalls that of a nun's mantle, and suggests a call to confession. Adelpho, who is revealed as the driver of the vehicle, bears out this implication when he tells Primo that he is a priest, as well as a worker in the cheese factory. He insists on a private talk. Adelpho speaks in parables. While he affirms Christian and Marxist values, Primo's eye fixes on the actions of a hunter in an adjacent field, and the abrupt fall of a dead bird.

The outside world is represented by bankers, financiers and the militia. Despite his wealth and class alignment, Primo's dealings with these scions of power are guarded and tentative. When he goes to ask for a bank loan he anticipates resistance. The frame is tilted, setting the scene off balance. He loses his temper and beings to shout before hearing the banker's favorable response. With the other money-lenders, Barbara takes the initiative, while Primo observes from a shadowed alcove. In a scene that verges on fantasy, yet holds to the established dream/reality, Barbara charms the financiers into vying with one another to offer the lowest interest rates. The money-lenders sprawl in bawdy conviviality on a red, circular lounge as Barbara, dressed in red, circulates seductively among them. She serves as a displacement of Primo's desire to exert his power over the sources of money, a desire which in reality is frustrated.

The separation/identification between the dreamer and the dream is borne out in the visual style of the film which plays upon multiple levels. With voyeuristic pleasure, we observe as Primo observes events through frames within frames. Characters move often in separate planes of action across the screen, while the camera smoothly penetrates the interstices of their involvements. Moreover, the lush visual surface of the film is spiced with rich primary colors and subtle introjections of slapstick.

Primo is a man conscious of his peasant origins, a man who speaks of himself as having been schooled in the Garibaldi brigades. He lays claim to partisan virtues as opposed to the terrorist politics he associates with his son's generation. Yet no amount of pride in accomplishment can overcome his sense of being less powerful than the money-lenders. With them he must rely on his native guile and the craftiness of a smart peasant. A sense of elation flows through him when he succeeds in outsmarting the "userers." As if he has just pulled off a robbery, he escapes on a bicycle with the money concealed innocuously in a series of plastic bags. "I was avenging his (Giovanni's) death," he boasts. "I could feel him with me on the handlebars." Primo has turned a dead son into a living asset, assuring that his "blood will fertilize the family soil."

Through these elements the Oedipal con-

flict which Bertolucci has elaborated on the personal level of dream-work articulates with the world at large. It is a world of class and racial antagonisms, both of which appear in Primo's first encounter with Laura. She seems "swarthy and alien," to Primo. While he watches from a secluded place, Barbara suggests to Laura that Giovanni must have been ashamed of her, because he never brought her home.

"He was ashamed of his father," says Laura.

It is a world in which a young man of peasant or working-class origins, with some drive and ambition, can try to satisfy his desire for wealth and land, for family and for a home. The price of all this, however, is the rejection of his own class identity and youthful ideals, the rejection of his son and the son's consequent rejection of him. His son's political involvements are made to seem suspect by the fact of surveillance. At one point a member of the invading militia describes Giovanni as a "wealthy extremist . . . adored, attractive, courageous," clearly qualities Primo would like to claim for himself, were he not compromised in having aligned himself with the patriarchal structure of the greater society. Bertolucci suggests it is this compromise that has emasculated Primo, has turned him against his son and has made him a ridiculous man.

Bertolucci is concerned with roots. His aim in *1900* was to help a younger generation reestablish contact with its peasant past and with the "civilization which lasted thousands of years and has practically died in only 50–70 years of industrial *progress*."[4] Primo's distance from his workers and from his own roots is attested to in scene after scene. Employees slave in the outer office while he sleeps behind his desk. On the roof he plays secretly with his new toys, spying on those who work far below him. Yet he has ambiguous feelings about his position. In a meeting with his employees, he bemoans his fate. "If this factory were a cooperative, I would not be a factory owner whose son has been kidnapped." At another time, not ready to give over complete control, he muses about the possibility of converting to a cooperative with himself as president. He is surprised to learn that Laura works for him, and more surprised to find that Adelpho works in the pig yards where he himself began. When he proposes to Laura and Adelpho his plan to steal the ransom money, he justifies it in terms of benefitting the workers, but in a quick cutaway to workers in the plant, an employee comments to his fellows, "It's the workers who pay in the long run."

Here is the point of view of the film-maker cast above the narrative voice of the father. But while Bertolucci's view of the father is devastatingly critical, it is nonetheless sensitive to the complex mixture of bravura and despair behind his paternal posturings. Finally, it is the dance, as in all of Bertolucci's previous films, that best crystallizes the sexual and political conflict of the film.[5]

There are two dance scenes in this film. Primo comes home to find the maid dancing with another young woman in the kitchen. He joins them, and with macho insistence takes the lead, but drops out as the woman continues to dance in the free style of her own generation. Later, Adelpho leads him to a community dance hall where young and old are gathered in an unlikely but amicable celebration. Adelpho eludes Primo by joining the dancers on the floor. His strange, trance-like gyration that continues after the music has stopped and the other dancers have left the floor mirrors the ridiculous in Primo's situation with regard to the changing world around him and at the same time suggests a spiritual transcendence through which the world may acquire new meaning. Adelpho's androgynous characteristics hold a potential for regeneration. Primo is forced to accept, although he still cannot comprehend, the miraculous process by which the whole being restores its life force.

Bertolucci has made a quantum leap in reconciling his own ambivalence toward the father. He controverts some primary cultural coding by means of the altered narrative structure and breaks through the Oedipal configuration to explore, in more Jungian and Marxian terms, the masculine dilemma in bourgeois society. This dreamwork / thriller offers a restructuring of the filmic codes as a means of expanding conscious awareness. In doing this it provokes and confuses the very consciousness it seeks to expand. This is not an easy film, despite its rich visual style. We are not, for instance, prepared to recognize

male impotence on the screen. The images challenge perception, and function as a measure of the degree to which what we see depends upon prior cultural conditioning. In all, this film is an impressive and eloquent statement that seems to come from a depth of personal experience and candid exposure rarely encountered on film.

—BROOKE JACOBSON

NOTES

1. Ranvaud, D. "La Tragedia di un uomo ridicuolo." *Monthly Film Bulletin,* XLIL:567, Jan. 1982.
2. Freud, S. *Interpretation of Dreams.* New York, Avon, 1965.
3. Houston, Beverle and Marsha Kinder. "Bertolucci and the Dance of Danger." *Sight and Sound,* Vol. 42, No. 4, 1973.
4. Bachmann, Gideon. "Every Sexual Relationship is Condemned," *Film Quarterly,* Spring, 1973.
5. Houston and Kinder, *op. cit.*

Books

AMERICAN DIRECTORS

Two volumes. Edited by Jean-Pierre Coursodon, with Pierre Sauvage. New York: McGraw Hill, 1983. $21.95 per volume cloth, $11.95 per volume paper.

On the whole, Jean-Pierre Coursodon's 874-page, two-volume *American Directors* is closer in genre to Richard Roud's *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* than it is to Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema.* Like both predecessors, it is an encyclopedia of opinions first and facts second—although, to its credit, it has many more facts per entry (in filmographies and career summaries) than either of the earlier monoliths. Like the Roud and unlike the Sarris, it attempts exhaustive surveys rather than suggestive critical miniatures, and is authored by many hands. Coursodon wrote 66 of the 118 essays and co-editor Pierre Sauvage, who furnished all the filmographies, contributed 13; the remaining 39 are by 20 other writers.

Again like the Roud, the Coursodon stands or falls as a compendium more than as a book with a sustained viewpoint; consecutive or continuous reading is neither recommended nor viable. Overall, the criticism is homogeneous, perhaps too much so: the standard auteurist form of career survey—already a bit fossilized—as developed out of Coursodon and Bertrand Tavernier's *Trente ans de cinema américain* (1970) and *The American Cinema* (1968) is so predominant here that other critical persuasions of the past two decades might as well have never existed. On the other hand, the critical frame of reference adopted by Coursodon and Sauvage is much wider than Sarris's by virtue of being more truly bilingual. Even if Kael gets four times as many citations in the index as Bazin (while Bellour, Fieschi and Heath get predictably none), French appreciation of American cinema is basic to the underpinnings of the subject, making this collection an ideal starting place for Americans who wish to learn more about the French enthusiasm for Tay Garnett, Jerry Lewis, Frank Tashlin and Don Weis (among others) in English. The fact that Coursodon winds up being somewhat equivocal about all four is characteristic, but it is precisely this balanced ambivalence that makes him an excellent mediator. A specialist in Hollywood comedy, Coursodon makes an unexpected, noble defense of Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*—a lot more interesting to read than all the predictable hatchet-jobs—and comes down hard on Chaplin's *A Countess from Hong Kong* no less persuasively, with particular emphasis on the continuity errors. The other French contributors are four able critics largely identified with *Positif:* Jean-Loup Bourget, Michael Henry, Alain Masson and Yann Tobin.

The remaining writers vary widely in effectiveness, although all tend to come across as competent. Ronnie Scheib's study of Ida Lupino is so strong that one regrets that she didn't contribute more to the collection; the chapter on Coppola by Diane Jacobs, the only other female contributor, regrettably doesn't extend beyond *Apocalypse Now.* Other pieces break down for me on individual caveats: in the essays on Budd Boetticher by Barry Gillam and William Wellman by Todd McCarthy, both otherwise respectable surveys, the two most experimental (and, to my mind, most interesting and effective) films by each director—*A Time for Dying* (1969) and *Track of the Cat* (1954), respectively—aren't even discussed. Myron Meisel is perceptive about John Cassavetes in general, but misses the

male impotence on the screen. The images challenge perception, and function as a measure of the degree to which what we see depends upon prior cultural conditioning. In all, this film is an impressive and eloquent statement that seems to come from a depth of personal experience and candid exposure rarely encountered on film.

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AMERICAN DIRECTORS

Two volumes. Edited by Jean-Pierre Coursodon, with Pierre Sauvage. New York: McGraw Hill, 1983. $21.95 per volume cloth, $11.95 per volume paper.

On the whole, Jean-Pierre Coursodon's 874-page, two-volume *American Directors* is closer in genre to Richard Roud's *Cinema: A Critical Dictionary* than it is to Andrew Sarris's *The American Cinema.* Like both predecessors, it is an encyclopedia of opinions first and facts second—although, to its credit, it has many more facts per entry (in filmographies and career summaries) than either of the earlier monoliths. Like the Roud and unlike the Sarris, it attempts exhaustive surveys rather than suggestive critical miniatures, and is authored by many hands. Coursodon wrote 66 of the 118 essays and co-editor Pierre Sauvage, who furnished all the filmographies, contributed 13; the remaining 39 are by 20 other writers.

Again like the Roud, the Coursodon stands or falls as a compendium more than as a book with a sustained viewpoint; consecutive or continuous reading is neither recommended nor viable. Overall, the criticism is homogeneous, perhaps too much so: the standard auteurist form of career survey—already a bit fossilized—as developed out of Coursodon and Bertrand Tavernier's *Trente ans de cinema américain* (1970) and *The American Cinema* (1968) is so predominant here that other critical persuasions of the past two decades might as well have never existed. On the other hand, the critical frame of reference adopted by Coursodon and Sauvage is much wider than Sarris's by virtue of being more truly bilingual. Even if Kael gets four times as many citations in the index as Bazin (while Bellour, Fieschi and Heath get predictably none), French appreciation of American cinema is basic to the underpinnings of the subject, making this collection an ideal starting place for Americans who wish to learn more about the French enthusiasm for Tay Garnett, Jerry Lewis, Frank Tashlin and Don Weis (among others) in English. The fact that Coursodon winds up being somewhat equivocal about all four is characteristic, but it is precisely this balanced ambivalence that makes him an excellent mediator. A specialist in Hollywood comedy, Coursodon makes an unexpected, noble defense of Woody Allen's *Stardust Memories*—a lot more interesting to read than all the predictable hatchet-jobs—and comes down hard on Chaplin's *A Countess from Hong Kong* no less persuasively, with particular emphasis on the continuity errors. The other French contributors are four able critics largely identified with *Positif:* Jean-Loup Bourget, Michael Henry, Alain Masson and Yann Tobin.

The remaining writers vary widely in effectiveness, although all tend to come across as competent. Ronnie Scheib's study of Ida Lupino is so strong that one regrets that she didn't contribute more to the collection; the chapter on Coppola by Diane Jacobs, the only other female contributor, regrettably doesn't extend beyond *Apocalypse Now.* Other pieces break down for me on individual caveats: in the essays on Budd Boetticher by Barry Gillam and William Wellman by Todd McCarthy, both otherwise respectable surveys, the two most experimental (and, to my mind, most interesting and effective) films by each director—*A Time for Dying* (1969) and *Track of the Cat* (1954), respectively—aren't even discussed. Myron Meisel is perceptive about John Cassavetes in general, but misses the

extent to which the closing reel of *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie* encapsulates the director's personal testament (above all, in the use of "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" in the nightclub). In his Michael Ritchie entry, Mark LeFanu just about wins me over when he relates *Smile* to Ibsen, but strains my credulity when he compares *Semi-Tough* to Makavejev.

It's in many of the shorter entries that the auteurist method seems most questionable; reliable deadwood facts and measurements tend to accumulate, often to little purpose. The first sentence by Pierre Sauvage on Norman Z. McLeod doesn't exactly compel one to read further: "In the course of a career devoted primarily to comedy and secondarily to musical comedy, Norman Z. McLeod, whose manner on movie sets was soft-spoken and unassuming, seems to have displayed little more than modest if occasionally serviceable craftsmanship." A similar aim seems to be behind much of the critical writing, with mixed results. One can only speculate over the system of inclusion that makes way for dutiful term papers on such directors as McLeod, Lloyd Bacon, Edward L. Cahn, Jack Conway, Gordon Douglas, Norman Foster, Hugo Fregonese, Stuart Heisler and Vincent Sherman, while excluding such diverse figures as René Clair, Monte Hellman, Dennis Hopper, Phil Karlson, Albert Lewin, Elaine May, Max Ophüls, Jean Renoir and James Whale.

The overall virtue that most of the contributors successfully strive for is judiciousness—a quality that especially characterizes David Sterritt on Robert Altman, John Belton on Robert Mulligan and Edgar G. Ulmer, Roger McNiven on Gregory La Cava and Jacques Tourneur, and Charles Wolfe on Busby Berkeley, Cecil B. De Mille and Mervyn LeRoy. It is the sort of reasonableness that one commonly associates with *Positif* rather than *Cahiers du Cinéma,* and relative *Cahiers*ists like myself may regret the relative absence of passionate hyperbole and delirium (LeFanu on Ritchie is a rare exception) that aims at polemics more than straight assessments. The problem is merely one of temperament, and other readers may value and even cherish *American Directors* precisely for some of those sturdy reasons that make me respect it more than enjoy it. Insofar as commonsensical critical judgments rather than provocations or challenges are the main bill of fare, this hefty work avoids the eclecticism of Roud's *Critical Dictionary* as well as the aphoristic bravado of early Sarris to settle on a steady, classic diet of meat and potatoes, served with dependable regularity. Students of the subject could do far worse; determined aesthetes may want to look further.

—JONATHAN ROSENBAUM

REVERSE ANGLE
A Decade of American Film

By John Simon. New York: Clarkson Potter, 1982. $19.95 cloth, $11.95 paper.

John Simon is one of the handful of movie reviewers who by force of will has avoided becoming the "consumer guide to movies" that newspapers, magazines, and in recent years television demands of would-be critics. Any reviewer who would be a critic soon finds that in a field overcrowded with experts, only a unique voice stands out. For Simon this has meant a lofty sneer towards the easy pleasures of popular culture and an embattled defense of traditional high-art values. Not surprisingly, he doesn't like much of what he sees in American movies. This detracts from the appeal of *Reverse Angle* which deals exclusively with American movies, over two hundred of them. The search for a good apple requires that we bite into many worms.

The test of Simon's critical mettle in dealing with American movies is to be found not in what he dislikes, but in what he seeks to certify as art. These films show an aesthetic consistency: *Chinatown, The Candidate, Straw Dogs, Marjoe, Sounder, All the President's Men, The Man Who Would Be King,* and Simon's all-time American favorite, Terence Malick's *Badlands.* Compared to the work of those film-makers for whom Simon reserves special scorn (Altman, Allen, Toback, Scorsese, and Cassavetes), we see that Simon prefers straightforward narrative form and dislikes most vestiges of modernism, especially playing with the medium. The films he likes generally display a liberal social consciousness, which makes it ironic that after stints at several magazines including the *New Leader* and *New York* he seems to have found a congenial home at William F. Buckley's *National*

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Review. (Do you think criticism has the power to change minds?)

There is much to recommend *Reverse Angle* even if we disagree with John Simon when he squeezes our sacred cows and finds they give water. After all, if we agreed with him down the line going to the movies would be a mostly painful experience. But Simon's writing is marked by economy, insight, and a graceful turn of phrase: we can disagree with him and still take pleasure in reading him. He is at his best in the introductory essays to the book, in which he defends with vigor his high-art perspective, and in his reviews of the difficult films he likes, *Straw Dogs* and *Badlands.* He is no less good when, like Pauline Kael, he jumps on his high horse and goes sociological, as in his criticism of Woody Allen's *Manhattan:* "What I deplore is the notion that maturing corrupts people, and that only beings as privilegedly childlike as Isaac and Tracy . . . can truly love. If there is anything our era does not need—on screen or elsewhere—it is a paean to immaturity, an attempt to pass off infantilism as the sole protector of our amatory relationships." Good criticism has always hinged on the human insight.

—WILLIAM SISKA

STILL LIFE

By Diane Keaton and Marvin Heiferman. New York: Callaway Books, 1983. $45.00.

An opulent coffee table book, *Still Life* is a form of cultural criticism using an unusual form of evidence: the Hollywood production still. Actress Diane Keaton and co-author Heiferman have assembled a collection of 62 production and publicity stills from Hollywood films produced during the late forties to late sixties. The intent is to show how each of these simultaneously garish, uncanny, astounding color images (from films ranging from *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* to *Ocean's 11* to *Bigger than Life* to *South Pacific*) represents Hollywood's synthetic vision of middle-class American life. Part of the book's project is to have the reader confront the very incomprehensibility of these images, and how they could have ever been part of a "realistic" narrative tradition, an acceptable rendering of American values and expectations in the postwar period. The book is also an exercise in uncovering American kitsch, but there is a fallacy in this respect: although we no longer find the precise kind of Technicolor clinch between Efrem Zimbalist and Jane Fonda in *The Chapman Report,* nor the vulgar domestic interiors of *The Thrill of It All* or *Youngblood Hawke,* Hollywood is still rife with banal representations of reality. There is an ultrachic snobbery operating here, and one lacking an historical perspective: fashions and promotional gimmicks may have changed, but Hollywood's ideological premises are essentially the same.

More significantly, the same images that we are asked to view with a quizzical eye we are also asked (given the packaging and high price tag) to accept as valuable cultural artifacts, images that would otherwise (by the authors' admission) be relegated to file cabinets or the dustbin. This may be an interesting attempt at visual deconstruction and cultural archeology, but its bent toward aggrandizing this garishness, treating it as a legitimate heritage, tends to undermine its critical project.

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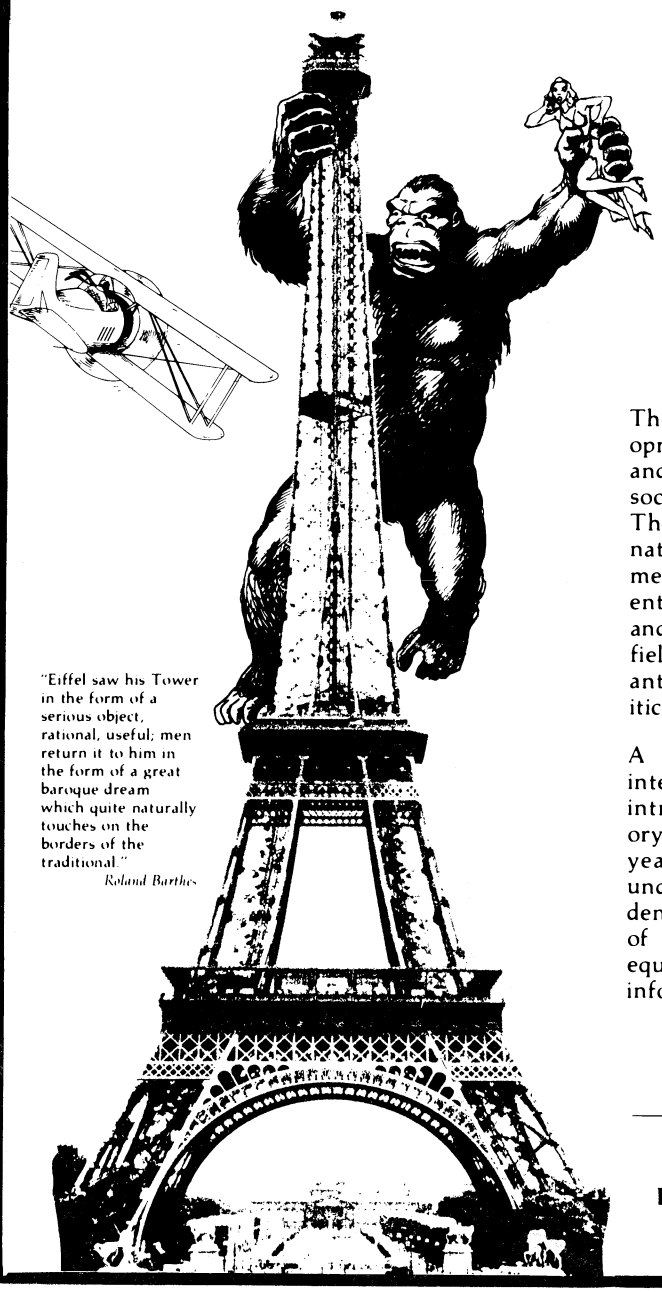

"Eiffel saw his Tower in the form of a serious object, rational, useful; men return it to him in the form of a great baroque dream which quite naturally touches on the borders of the traditional."
Roland Barthes

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